

THE ID IN THE AD

SORINA CHIPER*

Abstract

One of the selling appeals used in advertising has definitely been sex. Despite critical voices that argue against the immorality of using erotic images to promote products, despite the vehement criticism of feminists, the presence of subtle or blatant sexual images, of excitement and fear is a cultural presence that is here to stay. Anthropologists and scholars of culture link current advertising practices with the Renaissance magic art. Magic, indeed is constructed in ads, in the rituals involving brands – the new gods – and advertising slogans – the modern mantras. This article outlines reasons why sex sells, cultural differences to the use of sex in advertising and provides a brief analysis of two Romanian ads in women's magazines.

Keywords: sex, advertising, magician, gender, culture.

Introduction

One of the labels that have been used in relation with contemporary society and recent socio-cultural developments is that of promotional culture. Promotion seems to have colonized all forms and orders of discourse and it is at the heart of daily life, be it in the media, in institutions, in the street, in the means of public transportation, in shops, everywhere. It is so pervasive that we have grown to fail noticing promotional messages anymore, despite the fact that the public space is "loud" with them.

Advertising, as part of the means by which promotion is realized, has been the target of much criticism. Some voices reject advertising as an unnecessary cost that raises the price of products. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, advertising medicine is forbidden precisely on account of this fact. Some other critics argue that advertising is ethically wrong, because it tends to create artificial needs, it presents products in an unrealistic way and it manipulates consumers' mind, in a bewildering avalanche of superlatives and high evaluation.

Regular marketing books capitalize on the four elements of the marketing mix: product, price, place and promotion, emphasizing technical aspects but leaving aside the social impact of advertising slogans, images or messages. This has been the province of psycho-sociologists, of critical discourse analysts, of feminists, or of the voice of communities that have found them offensive.

* Asistent la Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Facultatea de Economie și Administrarea Afacerilor

A large share of the heaviest criticism has been targeted so far to the use of phrases or of images with covert or overt sexual implications. Undeniably, sex sells. Why is it so, what are the differences in advertising to men and women using sex as an appeal, what various cultures sanction and how exactly do copywriters create sexual allusions? These are the questions that I wish to address in this article, using for exemplification print advertisements from magazines for women.

Why does sex sell?

The construction of an advertisement is based on an appeal that can be *intellectual*, *emotional* or *moral*. The intellectual appeal draws upon the product's qualities and it offers potential buyers technical data, scientific proofs or specialized testimony that the product is worth buying. This is, for instance, the appeal that Colgate and Blend-a-Med have used in their TV commercials.

The emotional appeal exploits the fact that the consumer is not in fact *homo economicus* or *homo rationalis*, as classical economic theory envisaged. Many of the buying decisions, especially when the offer is extremely large and the products are convenience goods, are not dictated by reason but by preference for a certain brand, by curiosity to try something new, or by the subliminal command conveyed through advertising, and which the human mind has internalized.

Last but not least, the moral appeal capitalizes on higher human motivations and creates a link between a product or a service and the buyer's feeling of social responsibility, patriotism, or ethical standards. The webvertising of Fair Trade products relies precisely on potential buyers' moral responsibility and concern for global security and justice [www.fairtradefederation.com].

For those who choose to construct the advertising message on the emotional appeal, sex comes as a natural choice, since it is the second psychological driving instinct, after self-preservation. Copywriters have learnt Freud's lesson that people carry desires, buried down in the subconscious, which cannot be fulfilled in the open because society circumscribes them. Advertisements address such repressed desires and provide the promise of fulfillment, in a socially acceptable way. The ad, then, appeals to what Freud called the id – the subconscious layer of one's personality, and it lures through prospective gratification.

Foucault, in his historical investigations of Ethics, reached the conclusion that the ethical substance, since Hellenic times, has been *aphrodisia*. In the Greek formula, *aphrodisia* underscored the sexual act as such, assigning pleasure and desire a secondary role. In the Christian formula, it is also the act that matters, but it is seen in natural, neutral ways, as fulfillment of the divine command to "multiply". Pleasure is excluded – many Fathers of the Desert insisted on the eradication of bodily pleasure as a necessary virtue to turn the body into spiritualized matter, an abode of the Holy Spirit. Desire is also eradicated, as a temptation from the devil, disruptive from the goal of salvation. In the secularized world, "the modern 'formula' of *aphrodisia* is desire, which is theoretically underlined and practically accepted, since you have to liberate your own desire. Acts are not very important, and pleasure – nobody knows what it is!" [Rabinow, 1991, 359].

In another line of thought, in anthropological terms, one could safely infer that promotion and trade have come to substitute religion – after all, Sunday is no longer the

day when most people go to church but the day when they go shopping – while recontextualizing some of its rituals. Car shows often invoke religious ceremonies, where the goddesses are the models, where music and ceremonial gestures abound, fragrances fill the air and adulators venerate the “sacred” object: cars.

Culianu, in his work on magicians, quoted Giordano Bruno’s remark that magicians used to control individuals by images especially shaped by their astral natures, whereas masses were easier constrained by means of images that addressed desires and fears commonly shared by all humans [Culianu, 1999, 118]. Similarly, the present-day magicians of words, image and technology discipline viewers into consumers by manipulating commonly shared erotic emotions. Advertisements work like magic, impressing minds with desires and urges to buy promises of success and bliss.

Love and death, desire and fear are undeniably connected in the psyche. Gilbert Durand, commenting upon some of Freud’s analyses, wrote that: “...behind Eros emerged Thanatos. The vital instinct was ultimately grounded on death’s very entropy, repetitiveness, dissolving substantiation” [Durand, 2003, 154].

We respond strongly to a sexual stimulus because what hides behind it is the solution to the existential anxiety of how to escape death. In many cultures, to acquire descendants means to defeat death by living through one’s offspring. The promise that advertisements make – satisfying sexual relationship – calls to mind the possibility of having children, and thus silences a subconscious worry of total extinction.

Gender influence on advertising

The reproductive instinct, though present in both men and women, evinces gender differences in its manifestations. In an article from 1996, taking heterosexuality as a norm, Richard F. Taflinger argued that men take interest in the sexual act as such and that they tend to be attracted by a woman’s looks only. The simple fact that a woman is young and healthy makes her sexually attractive. For a woman, sexual desire is more than a matter of looks. She is also interested in whether a man can father healthy children, if he will support and protect her through pregnancy and child-rearing. Sexual intercourse does not matter as an act *per se* but through its implications for the future.

Given this difference in perception, the strategy used in advertising to men and women differs significantly when resorting to erotic emotions as a marketing appeal. The co-presence of a beautiful woman and a product advertised for men creates an association in their mind between the product and the woman. The link can be direct: you buy the product, you get the woman; or, it can be indirect: this is what women appreciate in a man. If you want the woman, you must have the product first. Advertisements for strong alcoholic drinks, such as those for vodka Voronskaya on the TV, have drawn precisely on this association.

This objectification of the female body has fueled severe criticism of advertising practices, from feminist activists. The advertising industry has been lashed for perpetuating stereotypical representations of women and traditional sex roles. On the other hand, the use of female bodies in advertisements for women has also been resented because, whereas the relationship between a male viewer and the female depicted is one of possession, the relationship between a female viewer and the woman represented in an advertisement is one of identification. Commercials invite women to imitate the young, emaciated models that are their protagonists. This phenomenon – the beauty myth, as

Naomi Wolf calls it – has led to eating disorders among women, to an obsession with meager bodies, with the idea that beautiful shapes are essential to one's social acceptance as a woman.

When advertising to women, it is quite often that romance, rather than blatant sex, is constructed in the ad's narrative. In the early 1990's, the spot for Impulse, for instance, pictured a woman in a red dress walking in the street, various people turning their heads after her, and a man offering her flowers on the spur of the moment, totally spell-bound. Such a context of romance fits into a woman's intellectual view of a relationship, since romance, born out of the medieval courtly love, is the framework where she chooses a partner, after careful examination of suitors' status, intellectual qualities and moral stance.

However, the drive for originality and the desire to create an impact on the market have often led to exceptions from the rule of courtly romance. Calvin Klein has run shockingly sexual campaigns, targeted at both men and women, without self-censorship in what concerns the use of nudity or the postures in which bodies can be represented. Similarly, Victoria's Secret, by the very nature of the products that the company sells, makes extensive use of sexy pictures of its models. In keeping with feminist protests against the perpetuation of traditional, patriarchal sexual by the advertising industry, some advertisements represented women as taking the initiative and men as passive recipients of the woman's action (the recent outdoor campaign for Ness Frappe pictures a woman touching a man's buttocks).

Currently, with the liberation of sexual mores and the social and institutional recognition and tolerance of homosexuality, homosexuals have become a target group themselves. In the same outdoor campaign for Ness Frappe, another poster shows two women seated at a table, with their long and bare legs touching under the table. In the summer of 2004, a poster advertisement for beer in Denmark pictured two naked women, one in the fore plan and the other one holding her from behind, one hand across her breasts and the other hand holding a bottle that was covering her pubic area. The poster was shocking to me, but not so to the Danes, where it is common to see topless women in public gardens in the summer, or to meet people who declare their homosexual orientation in a very straightforward way.

Cultural differences in using sex as a marketing appeal

Not all countries or cultures are as liberal as the Danish culture. In general, the amount of sex in advertising is regulated by bodies at national level, or indirectly, by unwritten cultural norms. Among them, religion acts as a strong censor.

In Muslim countries, religious laws apply in all contexts. To give one example, in Saudi Arabia, Sharia – the Islam laws – prescribes the duties, the morals and the behavior of Muslims. What Sharia establishes as taboo cannot be used in advertising, namely: alcohol, gambling, cheating, idol worshiping, usury, adultery, immodest exposure [Lancaster, Reynolds, 2002, 468]. Advertising in Muslim cultures, therefore, is mostly factual, and sexual messages, if any, are very subtle.

Advertising messages of multinationals willing to enter Muslim markets must be adapted to the local culture so as not to offend the locals. Cultural adaptation requires that models' bodies be covered in long gowns, or that their legs or arms, if visible in the original picture, be shaded [Lancaster, Reynolds, 2002, 469]. A print campaign for

Drakkar Noir pictured a man's right hand holding a bottle of the perfume advertised and a woman's hand gripping the man's wrist. The print ad was almost identical in France, Spain and in the United States: the woman's grip is strong and the man's arm is bare. However, in Saudi Arabia, the man's arm was covered by the white sleeve of his shirt and the dark sleeve of a suit. The woman's hand, on the other hand, no longer circled his wrist but touched his skin slightly, with one finger only [Pavel, 2003, 56].

What is allowed or forbidden is a legal matter, but also an issue of ethical and professional consciousness. For exemplification, I shall use the case of Israel where the National Committee for Audio and Visual Media has set rules for the use of the female body, and more recently for the use of the male body, as an object conveying a sexual message [Pavel, 2003, 55]. This is why the outdoor advertising of Gideon Oberson's bathing suits featuring a woman on a beach, in a provocative posture, outraged the local religious community in Tel Aviv in 2002 [Pavel, 2003, 52].

The Id in Romanian Ads

Many advertisements in the Romanian media are built on sexual allusions, some of which are blatant, while others are subtler. In what follows I will analyze two advertisements: the former is for the Invincible Kiss Proof L'Oreal lipstick, which appeared in the October 2004 issue of *Avantaj*, p. 17 and the latter for Dorna mineral water, which appeared in the September 2003 issue of *Unica*, p. 9.

In the case of the former ad it is quite natural that the advertising appeal should be sexual, since the product is a strong "weapon" among the feminine arsenal of seduction. The ad has several levels of discourse, superimposed, creating the impression of perspective from the black line underlining the name of the firm, on the uppermost part of the ad, to the low right corner, where L'Oreal appears again. The visual discourse of the ad basically consists of a fair woman and a dark-haired man, both in black, almost touching their lips in a kiss that promises to be passionate. The woman – slightly taller than the man – is definitely in control – with her arm covering the man's chest, and drawing his head close to hers, with her right hand.

In terms of Kress and Leuween's division of images into the realms of the given vs. the new, the real vs. the ideal, the erotic scene is inscribed in the realm of the ideal, the new, the possible, whereas the bouquet of 8 lipsticks, in various colours, is placed in the low right corner, in the realm of the new and the real. To be in the position of a conquering woman – as the one depicted in the ad – requires nothing but the purchase of the magic product!

In the other ad, the association of mineral water and an erotic encounter is less common. Mineral water, after all, is not an aphrodisiac. Yet, the copywriters used a script that recontextualizes the myth of the erotic encounter between a young man and a woman. The erotic scene features the man as the conqueror, with an unbuttoned shirt, leaning over the totally submissive woman, half sunk in water and gazing into the man's eyes. The ad viewer is constructed as a voyeur, intruding on an intimate scene visually located, as in the previous ad, in the realm of the possible, the ideal.

The connection between this tender erotic scene and mineral water is rendered explicit by the anchoring text, on the right, that translates as "You are vaporous when you love. You freeze when you are nervous. You float when you are happy. Because you are 70% water. And you experience millions of states and emotions, almost as many

molecules are in drop of pure water. Dorna Water. Pure, natural and clear, Dorna is your source of vitality and freshness directly from Vatra Dornei, a protected ecological area. So that you should melt with joy. So that you should live!" [Unica, 2003, 9].

Conclusions

To conclude, irrespective of the nature of the products advertised, sex is the ubiquitous lure used by ad-makers to tempt consumers. Culture, and especially religion, impact the context of advertisements. What in secularized countries such as Denmark, Sweden or the Netherlands, is perceived as simply sexy, in more traditional and conservative countries, with prohibitive religious norms, similar images are perceived as pornographic and offensive, and consequently they are not allowed in public discourse. Yet culture is not the only site of difference. Variation in the script or images also comes from the audiences targeted and from the difference in perception that men and women have of sex. Whereas the former appreciate it as an act per se, of immediate gratification, the latter view it from a long term perspective, as a potential first step to procreation. This is why advertisements for men create a direct link between the object advertised and sex while advertisements for women construct an indirect link, mediated by the topos of romance. Whereas the latter simply make an allusion to sex, and rely on women's imagination to fill in the unsaid or the unknown, in societies of very libertine mores, advertisements for homosexuals are very blunt and conspicuous.

Undeniably, marketers know how to stimulate potential customers to buy by first stimulating their senses. Eros has always been powerful, in all ages, and its magic has been put to the service of State order, as Culianu argued, or to the service of the new gods of consumerist society, as it is the case today. Be it blatantly overt or masterly covert, be it criticized or circumscribed by local laws or mores, the id invariably appears in the ad.

References

1. Culianu, Ioan Petru - *Eros si magie in Renastere*, Nemira, Bucuresti, 1999.
2. Durand, Gilbert, *Arte si arhetipuri*, Meridiane, Bucuresti, 2003.
3. Kress, Gunter, Leeuwen, Theo van, *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*, Routledge, London, 1999.
4. Lancaster, Geoff, Reynolds, Paul, *Marketing. The One Semester Introduction*, Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, Auckland, Boston, Johannesburg, Melbourne, New Delhi, 2002
5. Pavel, Noemi Revnic, "Marca internationala si cea locala in Orientul Mijlociu - un studiu de publicitate comparata", in *Jurnalism si Comunicare*, no. 3, Universitatea din Bucuresti, Tritonic Media, Bucuresti, 2003, pp. 51-56.
6. Rabinow, Paul, *The Foucault Reader, An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Penguin Books, London, New York, Victoria, Ontario, Auckland, 1991.
7. Taflinger, Richard F. "Taking Advantage. You and Me, Babe: Sex and Advertising", 1996, <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~taflinge/sex.html>
8. Wolf, Naomi, *The Beauty Myth*, Vintage: London, 1991.
9. *** Avantaje, Romanian Publishing Group SRL, Bucuresti, octombrie 2004,
10. *** Unica, Ringier, Bucuresti, septembrie 2003.
11. www.fairtradefederation.com