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Values and Sports in Romanian Commercials

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Abstract

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Taking into account the inspirational connotation of the presence of sports in the content of the commercials, the present paper tries to examine the role played by the values associated to sports and the message of the commercial. The method of work consists in stylistic and semiotic analysis. By using such methods the author will emphasize the set of values chosen by the advertisers in order to convey the necessary mental atmosphere. Such an atmosphere is necessary in order to seduce the buyers. The personalities from sports and the values they are associated to are important elements highlighted by the present work. Last but not least, the element that links the message from the sport context to the value of the product is of vital importance for the future customers, irrespective of the fact that they realize it or not while watching the commercials..

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Keywords: Sports; commercials; values; stylistic and semiotic approach.

1. Introduction

The reason behind the choice to approach the issue of values in the message of commercials endorsed by sports stars is, undoubtedly, the attractiveness of sports to audiences. The definition provided by Davidson (Davidson, 1992) to advertising, “a commercial tool, a social language, a genre of spectator/reader experience, a technique of persuasion; in fact, it is a world in its own right, with its own language, customs and history, and one that sets the tone and pace for large parts of our lives.”, points to the complexity of this phenomenon, which seems not only to dominate our lives, but also to define them (Steven & Andrews, 2005: 4). The attention towards this topic is thus perfectly justified, particularly that “whether from a quantitative, qualitative or interpretive perspective, whether a researcher follows the modern social scientific approach, critical theory perspective or postmodernist approach, analysis of advertising and other media is of growing importance.” (Ahmed, 2000)

A widely known discourse type in all contemporary societies, commercials have the function to convey information and in the same time to allure people to buy a certain product. By using personalities from sport, they intend to create a stronger impression, as “only sports has the nation, and sometimes the world, watching the same thing at the same time, and if you have a message, that’s a potent message” (Singer, 1998), sports being associated with positive images (of health, national values). The values and social norms promoted in commercials endorsed by sport stars unquestionably influence the “cognitive maps” of people, shaping their way of thinking. If years ago people used to live in a world in which they needed products and services, nowadays society witnesses a reversed reality, in which a huge amount of products need people. Thus, advertisers are confronted with a huge pressure: “At every turn, the pressure is on to find fresher, more desirable, and more spectacular images to enhance the value of products. [...] As sign value competitions intensity, advertisers invent new strategies and push into fresh cultural territory, looking for ‘uncut’ and ‘untouched’ signs. Under such circumstances no meaning system is sacred, because the realm of culture has been turned into a giant mine”. (Goldman & Papson, 1996) Beside their role of increasing consumption, commercials can be said to play an important ideological role within the contemporary consumer culture. The Romanian society, and society in general, has witnessed the transformation of sport into a kind of “national currency” (Clarke & Clarke, 1982), therefore it should not be surprising that advertising industry has devoted to sport, as it is “one of the oldest and most universal forms of performative culture”.

Beside the role they play in the economic area, ads disseminate values. Romanian values are to a certain extent circumscribed to general/international ones, this is why the present work can be interesting from a comparative perspective. As personalities from sports have acquired international fame, they somehow mediate the way between local and worldwide, between national and international values.

2. Methodology

This section will contain the presentation of the method used in the research upon commercials with sports personalities and the values associated to their presence and the message of the ads as a whole. Also, the results of the steps undertaken will be offered. The objective of the present approach is to

pinpoint the contexts in which the endorsers appear and the type of value the ad conveys and also to detect meanings relevant to the general message by means of semiotic and stylistic analysis.

2.1. Purpose of the Present Paper

The category of commercials in which Romanian sport stars appear have been chosen because of the special status they enjoy in nowadays society. They act according to a set of values and through the message they transmit they shape behaviours and world views. It is a universal truth that the love of sport is part of human nature, but how such an innate inclination is exploited through advertisements is a different topic with a profound echo. Sport is an important advertising platform as it can be used to foster positive attitudes toward advertising in general and to a specific advertised product in particular. Researchers have shown that people's attitudes towards certain products or brands is based on their attitude towards commercials and that their attitudes are responsible in their decision to buy.

The purpose of the present approach – which represents the element of novelty of this paper – is to highlight through semiotic and stylistic analysis the connection between the values attached at the connotative level to sports endorsers and the overall message of the commercials.

2.2. Research Methods and Findings

2.2.1. Theoretical Framework

At the basis of the semiotic analyses lies C. S. Peirce's theory of sign, whose tenet is that a sign signifies in the only situation in which it is interpreted. As everything concerning human experience has to do with signs, one distinguishes three type of signs: iconic, symbolic and indexical. The messages of the ads are conveyed through words, sounds and visual images. Television commercials include both verbal and nonverbal signs, so their study entails deciphering the framing of meanings, as they are always contextual.

Another theoretical dimension is represented by Stephen Ullmann's levels of stylistic analysis: sound/graphological, semantic and syntactic. One can therefore speak about style markers at the graphological level, which are meant to attract the audience's attention, rendering a product outstanding. At the sound level, mention is to be made of a very widespread technique for bringing to the fore a brand name by making the slogan rhyme with it. At the semantic/lexical level, the generous usage of commendatory words is intended to seduce the potential buyers. (Turner, 1973) At the syntactic and grammatical level, by using complex and compound sentences, advertisers offer details and also highlight what is exceptional about a product. Interrogations, soft irony and humour combine to arouse the viewer's attention, the present tense signalling the good quality of the commodity as well as its long-lasting and ever-lasting effect. (Li, 2009)

The material of analysis is represented by Romanian commercials which have been running on TV channels during the last three years (2013, 2014, 2015) and the first five months of 2016. The selection of commercials was based on the presence of Romanian sports personalities. A special attention was paid to those commercials that offered a richer material for the set of guiding questions formulated with a view to attaining the present paper's goal. The research method used takes into consideration the complex nature of the commercials, as products that can be viewed as "message systems designed to

organize perceptions and create structure of meaning” (Williamson, 1978). A product of our day-to-day social reality, it is also a unique part of it, as “no other institution, except perhaps religion, commands the mystique, the nostalgia, the romantic ideational cultural fixation that sport does. No other activity so paradoxically combines the serious with the frivolous, playfulness with intensity, and the ideological with the structural.” (Frey & Eitzen, 1991)

Throughout the present research some questions will be answered in order to verify the following hypotheses:

- sports personalities appear in advertisements very many times including examples of lifestyle, family life or work place imagery;
- the values conveyed by the Romanian ads in discussion depend on the gender of the sport star;
- the roles celebrities more often play is that of recommender and the role of himself/herself.

2.3. *Sports and Commercials in Romania*

According to recent studies referring to the degree in which Romanians are interested in watching commercials, there seems a very low interest motivated by the fact that ads are boring and repetitive. The most recent study was performed in February 2016 by iSense Solutions for Digital Marketing Forum and it used a sample of 500 people. The data obtained is representative for Romanians with ages between 18 and 65 who live in urban areas. The conclusion drawn by the researchers is that “brands face more and more difficulties in reaching a consumer who lacks patience, who is multi-screen and multitasking and who doesn’t accept to lose his time any longer to accept messages he doesn’t resonate with. This trend will reconfigure the marketing and advertising industry, because brands will have to focus on relevant content, adapted to targeted public’s needs and expectations.” (Study: TV Commercials avoided by 80% of the Romanians)

Under these circumstances, the attention of the advertisers is even more entitled to be focused on areas of interest for the Romanians. By far, football is the Romanians’ most popular sport, and this is why it is no surprise to find Gheorghe Hagi, the most internationally renowned football player, in many TV commercials. Gymnastics, tennis and boxing gave other internationally famous Romanians. Mention is to be made of the fact that individual sports are favoured as far as the sportspersons’ presence of in TV commercials is concerned.

2.3.1 *Sports Stars and the Romanian Society*

No matter the nationality of the sports stars, their inspirational role is a common denominator of all personalities that are famous in this domain. Within the equation of the three types of people one can come across in sports and business alike – those who make it happen, those who watch it happen and those who wonder what happened – sports celebrities belong to the first category. Attractive sports endorsers such as Nadia Comăneeci, Gheorghe Hagi, Simona Halep, Ilie Năstase, etc are used by advertisers to suggest attainment of an ideal image through product use. Therefore, by consuming *Rama* margarine people are expected to adopt a healthy life style as that of successful sportspersons. The fact that Nada Comaneci recommends such a product creates in the viewers the need of identification with the status of prestige she stands for. Beside physical attractiveness, the non-physical

attractiveness dimension is of a crucial importance, as it is based on personality, lifestyle and intellectual values the endorsers display.

2.3.2 *Values and Commercials Endorsed by Sports Celebrities*

Commercials contain a large amount of information concerning the product and this is very important because thus the receivers of the message will take the decision to buy being convinced that they make a good choice. But beside information and information-related reasons to buy one should not lose sight of the importance of the emotional attachment among consumers. The emotional and psychological bond consumers form with sports and sports stars are bound to positively influence their behaviour, thus reducing possible pre-existing negative perceptions of advertising (such as annoyance, materialism or even falsity). Consumers are influenced to buy a certain product due to their identification with the image of the spokesperson, whose popularity or attraction makes them feel good about the product recommended.

Social role and image is considered to have an important impact on the attitude towards advertising in general. David Potter sees advertising as an institution of abundance and asserts that “the most important facts in this powerful institution [advertising] are not upon the economics of our distributive system: they are upon the values of our society.” (Potter, 1954: 188) Since it is said that someone’s behaviour reflects their values better than their words or thoughts, society needs role models meant to share rules. Romanian sports celebrities represent Romanian landmarks and are positively deemed, as they are very much related to the brand of our nation.

2.4. *Commercials Approached from a Semiotic and Stylistic Angle*

2.4.1 *Semiotics and Commercials*

Visual images weigh heavily when it is about to decipher the nature of society and social relationships, as signs and symbols construct meaning and deliver messages to people. According to Bergsen, “Visual symbols are a language. They are therefore decipherable into [...] codes that carry and communicate social information” (Bergsen, 1984) Beside the analysis of speech patterns such as vocabulary, tone, etc as indicative of social class or of some other details, connotations are valuable in the examination of the production, functioning, respectively reception of a message (be it oral, written, iconographic or gestural). Commercials come with very attentively planned systems of meanings which function against the background of a certain cultural environment. Signs, be they iconic, indexical or symbolic, engage in relationships either on the syntagmatic or on the paradigmatic axis, depending on the focus. This focus may be on similarities or differences between them in a certain context (choice of the right person to appear in a commercial: an ordinary person or a celebrity from art or sport) or it may be on the combination of signs belonging to different paradigms in order to create a message (the blending of the spokesperson, background, music, chromatic, etc in order to make a commercial). Very many times viewers are left to understand the connotative meanings lying behind the explicit, denotative ones, or they even are left to choose among multiple meanings in commercials. This effort of getting to one’s own meaning offers satisfaction and attaches a positive evaluation of the viewers who feel engaged in the play offered by the ad.

In order to achieve the goal of the present paper several questions will be taken into account:

1. What values appear in the commercials endorsed by Romanian sports celebrities?
2. Which are the symbols related to values in the commercials under discussion?
3. Which is the relation between the elements carrying semiotic meaning and the linguistic message of the commercials?

2.4.2 *Stylistics and Commercials*

The images obviously organise cultural meaning, and it was rightfully stated that “not only are commodities joined to signs, commodities get produced as sign and signs become produced as commodities.” (Goldman, 1992) However, attention should be paid to the part played by the verbal message of the commercials as well. Beside the visual content, the verbal one helps people identify and keep in mind a certain message or product. Ever since Aristotle and Cicero’s canons of rhetoric (some of whose overlap those of the former, yet reorganized into a more formal set of principles), style (elocutio) has supposed the purposeful use of linguistic elements with a view to creating a certain impression on the audience’s mind. It refers to the strategic use of language resources, that is, specific word choices, tropes, etc. Taken within the background of such purposes, advertising campaigns cannot be considered just simple shot messages but long-term endeavours to get to the consumers and to lead them think and act in a certain desired way: “persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of persuasive argument suitable to the case in question.” (Covino, et. al, 1995)

The three levels of stylistic analysis – sound/ graphological, semantic and syntactic – will reveal style markers responsible for catching the audience’s attention (such as “The Romanians Have Initiative”), the use of praising words, interrogations, etc. in slogans being meant to allure receivers and make them part of the message. After all, the manner in which a certain matter is expressed is very many times more valuable than the content itself. Figures of speech are considered to be responsible of what the semiotician R. Barthes called the “pleasure of the text”, offering the reward of processing an intelligent arrangement of signs. The memorability of a language which uses tropes (residing after all in the pleasure given by the positive effects on the audience’s attention) resides in the involvement of the reader in the elaboration of meaning.

2.5. *Findings*

The present study involved commercials running on Romanian TV channels during the last three years, in which Romanian sport celebrities recommend different types of products (food, beverage, services, banks), attaching them special meanings. Advertising is a prominent discourse type in all societies, whose primary feature lies in its persuasive function. More than this, is the fact that “adverts utilize a pre-existent referent system of meaning, because the product, prior to signification in the advert, has no meaning.” Commercials promote directly or indirectly universal values (respect, responsibility, solidarity, honesty, tolerance), as well as particularized versions of values (personal, family, socio-cultural, material, spiritual, moral values).

Georghe Hagi, the internationally famous football player, appears in the ad for *Loto Classic* snacks, where the voiceover mentions values in a direct manner: “Great generations have a great responsibility: to offer future generations love, knowledge and quality. These are the values that a generation should transmit to another generation. *Loto Classic* – we grow generations. From Best Foods” (“Marile generații au o mare răspundere: sa le ofere generațiilor viitoare dragoste, cunoștințe și calitate. Acestea sunt valorile pe care trebuie să le transmită o generație celeilalte. *Loto Classic* - creștem generații. De la Best Foods.” Stylistically speaking, repetition and parallelism are used in the creation of gradation which will culminate with the name of the brand (great generations ... great responsibility [...] a generation ... another generation [...] we grow *generations*). The name of the brand is associated to the “great generations”: the connotation of the first person plural construction in “we grow generations” is that behind success lies the quality of the product advertised. At the semantic level, one can notice the [+Positive Evaluation] and [+Quality] features: “great generations”, “love, knowledge and quality”, “Best Foods”, together with [+Responsibility]: “great responsibility”, “we grow generations”.

Gheorghe Hagi is indirectly present in the campaign promoting the equipment of the national team in the Penny Market chain. He is present here intertextually speaking, as his words are evoked and he is addressed by a supporter who is trying to convince Santa Claus to send him to Euro 2016 to be near the national team. He uses a famous word of advice belonging to Hagi: “Gică, while in France, we will take your advice, so that everything will be fine, not bad!” (“Gică! noi în Franța luăm exemplul tău, ca să fie bine, să nu fie rău!”). Beside the ironical element of intertextuality (meant also to make the ad memorable), the value exploited here is patriotism. Together with sports event involvement, patriotic feelings are key elements that are expected to lead to the consumers’ positive response to the advertised brand. The very same pattern is used in the ad for Bergenbier ad, in which Gabi Balint and Bogdan Stelea, two golden names of the Romanian football, invite viewers to buy beer and participate to the Super Caravan “I am 12”.

Nadia Comăneci, together with Ilie Năstase and Gheorghe Hagi have been the BRD image of Romania for several years. In a humorous video (Romania – Land of Choice) they state that Romania is the only country in the world where women have the legal right to marry four men at the same time, that here people ride zebras and fish grow on trees. Towards the end of the commercial the voiceover asks rhetorically: “You know nothing about Romania, do you? It’s time to come and discover it: real sights, real experiences, real people”. Humour is a “cultural universal” and marketers use humorous claims successfully as part of their strategy. The entire commercial is based on a situation reversal toward the end, with a view to making it memorable. Beside the hilarious images and speech, the invitations to see Romania are part of the effort to make it known in the world. National values such as tradition, history and people are referred to in the voiceover’s invitation: “real sights, real experiences, real people”. The repetition of the modifier “real” (which can stand for “extraordinary”/ memorable/ great”) creates a gradation intended to balance, in a serious manner this time, the humour from the first part of the ad.

Nadia Comăneci appears as well in commercials transmitting other types of values: the individualistic one, which attach value to the self, of a champion, more than to anything else. In *Rama* margarine ad, Nadia expresses her freedom and her right to decide what is good in terms of food for

her son. The motivation underneath is her complex life and her focus only on essential things. Another reason for doing this is the competition spirit she used to grow with. Family values are also present in this ad, the international gymnast appearing in the role of mother: “Rama helps in the proper growth of Dylan, being always present in what we call the ‘champions’ breakfast”. And we never miss it.” (Rama ajută buna creștere a lui Dylan, fiind mereu prezentă în ceea ce noi numim ‘micul dejun al campionilor’. Și niciodată nu-l ratăm.) Intertextuality is used with a view to influence both the production and the consumption of a text. It is obvious that within Nadia’s speech the connotation of phrases such as “competition spirit” and “champions’ breakfast” has to do with the idea of excellence. At the linguistic level mention must be made of the fact that phrases pointing to the reason why viewers should buy Rama margarine: “it is a good source of essential fats” are doubled by other phrases which are obviously part of a tickle strategy: “the ‘champions’ breakfast”. There are two types of claims – rational and emotive–, so the product should be bought for its qualities but also because champions use it as well. *Rama* ad addresses material values as well, related to the basic needs of humans, and it appears to give the solution to a healthy life style, meant to double a successful life.

Simona Halep and Leonard Doroftei are two other personalities who endorse products in commercials that value family, professionalism and excellence. They both appear as vulnerable persons who need support. Leonard Doroftei is helped by Actimel, which improved the way in which his body managed to defend against diseases: “I have always had an active life which demanded a lot effort. That is why my body was weakened and I used to catch a cold very often – until I discovered Actimel.” (“Am avut întotdeauna o viață activă care cerea multe eforturi. De aceea organismul era slăbit și obișnuiam să răcesc foarte des – până am descoperit Actimel.”) Doroftei’s speech is constructed on a binary polar structure: *active life (+) – a lot of effort (-); body was weakened(-) – I discovered Actimel (+)*. The second part of his speech is doubled by the symbolism at the visual level (we see him boxing) and it is constructed on the polysemy of the word “defence”: “And thus, with a strong defence, I can face any challenge. Both my family and I!” (Și astfel, cu o apărare puternică, fac față oricărei provocări. Atât eu, cât și familia mea!). By “defence” viewers who see Doroftei in a boxing posture understand the body’s defence against weakness and disease, the success the boxer has in ring, and the ability to face challenges. Simona Halep is another fighter for Romania’s name, who looks good and is highly regarded by her fans and by the media. She appears in the campaign for Vodafone products. National pride, support and family values appear embodied by means of these commercials: the slogans speak for themselves – “Every Encouragement Matters” (“Fiecare încurajare contează”), “The Romanians Have Initiative” (“Romanii au inițiativă”). Every time, the linguistic message is supported by the visual elements, which, symbolical or not, point to the same direction: television commercials are cultural texts in which quick cuts, loud music and vivid action create an energy impossible to forget.

3. Conclusions

After analysing the most resourceful ads one can conclude that some of the hypotheses have been confirmed: sportspeople do appear within contexts involving family, workplace of lifestyle imagery; they play indeed the roles of recommender and himself/herself; nevertheless, the hypothesis that the

values conveyed depend on the gender of the endorser hasn't been confirmed. Through the use of sports personalities in commercials one witnesses a process of transformation of sport from a participation-oriented and playful activity into one that is guided by principles of commercialism and entertainment. Nevertheless, they embody values (they can be said to be the main symbolic presence related to the values promoted) such as self-discipline, competition, hard work, goal attainment and fair play. As consumers may have different sets of values when they choose to buy (brand, quality, price, design preferences), celebrities' recommendations are expected to increase opinions of attraction and responsibility. Endorsers from the world of sport are examples of persons who managed in life; therefore they are a metaphoric presence that rightfully presents quality as a result of better workmanship motivated by higher standards. Out of the many possible reasons why people buy – quality, integrity, tradition, self-expression –, the last one stresses the most their emotional side, referring to individuality and personal challenge. At the linguistic level one should underline the fact that their words emphasize once again the values conveyed at the image level, a technique intended to make the commercial even more memorable. The fact that the celebrities appear together with their families in commercials may be explained through the fact that in periods of crisis a special focus is placed upon security and stability within family. The role-model status of celebrities may be a sign of a society in need of recipes for success. The category of celebrities from sport is used as a psychologically motivating power. Both rational and emotional appeals are used in order to influence the viewers' behaviour, endorsers usually placing stress on meeting the consumers' psychological, social or symbolic needs.

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