

Manipulation through advertising - is advertising positive or negative?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to underline the role of advertising in the manipulation of persons. We can identify a positive (constructive) and a negative (destructive) manipulation. The subconscious is the most powerful side inside us, the side that dictates to ration (but which may also collaborate in good conditions). It considers suggestions from everywhere, it implants them deep inside and creates commands related with advertising.

Keywords: *manipulation, advertising, persuasion, behavior*

The “manipulation” concept

Manipulation is defined as: the action of determining a social actor (person, group, and collectivity) to think in a compatible manner with the initiator's interests, and not with his/her own interests, throughout the use of persuasion methods that distortion the genuine truth, leaving instead the impression of free reasoning and deciding. Unlike the influence of rational persuasion, throughout manipulation it is not pursued the correct and more profound apprehension of the situation, but the replacing of the convenient apprehension, referring both to introducing the error throughout false arguments, and to non-rational bearings. The bad intentions of the one who communicates the message remain indistinguishable to the receiver.

Some persons consider there is a clear difference between persuasion and manipulation. A difference between manipulation and persuasion is that the first one is based on persuasion, meaning the tendency of being responsive to influences. Unlike the suggestion ability, the persuasion ability implies the individual's acceptance and the internalized consciousness of the transmitted messages.

Manipulation is an instrument, its ethics are set by the person who's using it and not by the instrument itself. We may in this way distinguish between positive and negative manipulation. Let's consider the example of a knife: we may use it to prepare food, we may use it to protect ourselves, or we may use it to kill. Could we say that we are using an unethical knife? No way. The ethics are set by the one who uses it, certainly not by the knife itself. The same happens with manipulation, we cannot state in any way that this would be a good or bad thing by itself.

In a general way, manipulation may be classified as follows:

a) by the action type and characteristics of the effect:

-constructive (positive);

-destructive (negative);

b) by the level of consciousness of the source:

-conscientious

-unconscientious

For example, mass-media can easily control society's reasoning (especially of the common individual). What determines the success of a manipulation action is the receiver's will to be manipulated. No one can be influenced to have a certain behavior if he/she doesn't wish to. The one being manipulated may quietly accept or take attitude against the manipulator. Friedrich Nietzsche considered that quite frequently, the murderer is not at the altitude of its deed: he minimizes it and defames it.¹

Manipulation in advertising

Through advertising, they aim to influence the consumer, by *triggering some conditioned reflexes* in the sense given by the one who develops advertising through suggestion. Advertising tries to create for the one to whom it's addressed a need by using some schemes of the conditioned reflexes, wisely hidden.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dincolo de bine și de rău*, Humanitas Publishing, Bucharest, 1992, p. 78.

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Under the mask of an informational character, advertising aims to shock more than to pursue, to suggest more than to explain. Then appears the obsession and the stringent need to have the advertised object, even if the manipulated person is not conscious of this and, especially, he/she doesn't need the respective object.

Advertising, as the political propaganda that is addressed to masses, intensely speculates the fact that the intellectual level of the masses is quite low. Consequently, it uses two main principles: through endless repetition of the same slogans, images, obsessive rhythmic sounds, is being created a mental estate of tiredness, which is favorable to submit to the will of who started this project; the second principle relays on the fact that the majority of people tend to believe in those things they wish to accomplish, even if these things do not have a real motivation, but they are based only on emotions. We are facing a genuine psychological imposture, a veritable "psychological rape" exercised upon the individuals and the masses.

Probably each of us bought at least once a product that we didn't need and this was due to the fact that advertising designers knew how to implement into our subconscious the desire to buy that product.

In order to succeed, an advert has to be created by specialists in manipulation of individuals, who know the secrets of implanting ideas in the subconscious.

As for increasing the advert efficiency, the persuasive and suggestive message has to enter the subconscious as many ways as possible. It must have a persuasive content (Buy!) and not an informative one. Only in this way the clients will buy as in trance, without thinking about the price, without thinking if the respective merchandises is necessary for them or not.

The subconscious is the most powerful side inside us, the side that dictates to ration (but with which it may also collaborate in good conditions). It considers suggestions from everywhere, it implants them deep inside and creates commands: Buy a certain thing! Do a certain job!

The message enciphered in the advert must contain two components: a logical one for the conscious, and a suggestive one for the subconscious. The two components must harmonize perfectly. Otherwise, the effect of the advert is null².

A quality advert is not stereotyped, weary, annoying or ridiculous. It must concentrate on the subconscious, because it is more gullible, more childish, while

² Pavel Coruț, *Arta succesului la români*, Miracol Publishing, Bucharest, 1993, p. 259.

ration has criticism that judge the message in a logic manner: Should I buy this? What for? I can do very well without it!

We must remember that the advertising speech is not composed by collective information about the products for sale: it is not the case of a purely informative speech addressed to consumers in order to help them decide upon their shopping in a straight rationing, referring to their previously established needs.

Consumers' behavior indeed is established more like a complex process of social communication with the unconscious forces of individuals' imagination than with their rationality.

Advert designers concentrate on the consumers' psychology, trying to decipher the psychological phenomena determined by the receive of advertising messages in general, in order to anticipate the behavioral answer of the public regarding the advert they are conceiving.

The amazing increase of information does not make us more informed but on the contrary: it creates confusion and dependence. Advertising creates needs adapted to the offer, enabling the formation of a programmed market. Advertising shapes the needs and aspirations, which have a negative effect upon society.

Similarly to the era we are living in, the adverts change astonishing rapidly, they are hedonist, they promote ideals and they are fashion influenced; they glorify the individual, idealize the consumption as being the way in which someone can accomplish oneself and sustain the technological progress as a driving force of destiny³.

The advert convinces people to buy things they don't need, convinces them to give up perfectly good merchandise, convinces poor people to wish for things they cannot afford, it expands a vile culture and creates exorbitant expectations that cannot be accomplished, promoting in this way a materialistic society. Unfortunately, there are adverts that encourage people's isolation, individualism, egocentrism and giving up on values in order to satisfy their own necessities (e.g. Budweiser, Twix).

The main goal of an advert is to obtain profit; serving the public becomes a second role.

In advertising, we handle many types of manipulation. Firstly, we can talk about an *emotional manipulation*, meaning that in order to influence the receiver it

³ *Treziți-vă! – cât de mult vă influențează publicitatea*, Watctower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 22 august 1998, p. 7.

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is necessary to induce him/her a special estate, which shall resort to the feeling. Secondly, it interferes the manipulation of the public's interests, and in order to achieve the influence the interests and those things that are directly connected to the eventual satisfaction must be known. In advertising, it's usual to recur to stereotypes, as for example to suggest certain qualities, without uttering them, and associating them to some qualities of the promoted product, throughout the proximity effect. This happens in Coca-Cola light advert, whose bases are that refreshing drinks without sugar help to obtain "the desired figure".

For the "Hochland" advert, the image capital of some nice, innocent children is used to nourish the viewer curiosity, which has the tendency to transfer the positive feelings for the characters towards the product that is being advertised; in this way is being imposed an idea without being argued – Hochland is good because some nice children say it is good.

The false causality represents the mean of manipulating in the spot "Head&Shoulders": you don't have dandruff; you are lucky in love; so you are lucky in love because you don't have dandruff.

In the "Almette" advert the syntax of words and images leads towards logically relating some elements, which do not necessarily generate a conclusion. The woman in the picture is eating Almette, a pure, delicious cheese. The woman in the picture is beautiful, happy, healthy. So, she is beautiful, happy, healthy because she eats "Almette".

In only half an hour of watching TV there can be viewed adverts saying that those products are more soft, last longer, are cheaper, are better; the washed clothes are whiter, they remain fresh for a longer time. It is interesting how the rational mechanisms do not function in these cases, which should reject as being false all the advertising materials. Instead, there are functional emotional mechanisms that give the winning cause to that advert which best uses the manipulation techniques.

There are many adverts that use exaggeration in order to increase the persuasion effect.

The typical example is that of an advert for a washing carpet detergent. We are shown an extremely dirty carpet, over which they sprinkle the detergent and just with a single brush upon it the carpet becomes as clean as new. In practice, no carpet detergent creates a similar effect, but you discover this after you buy it.

Referring to the shapes that manipulation may take in advertising, there are specialists even for make-up products: specialists who varnish the fruits in order to

look shinier, more appetizing and more ... natural, who add powder in the beer drafts in order to produce foam waves or who bleach chemically the laundry in order to give "*the absolute white*".⁴

The advertisement exaggerates, deceives, appeals to sex and frivolity, presents irrational stories, creates exorbitant expectations and in general promotes a materialistic society.

There are a multitude of advertisements that teach youngsters how to have protected sex, how to keep away from AIDS, drugs, weapons. There are ecologist spots or that stimulate people to read.

Some advertisements are deceiving, gaudy and lamentable, but the big majority is not and if someone truly believes in the freedom of expression, he/she takes the good, the bad and the ugly as part of a whole, with the hope that of course, the social positive forces will reward the ones which communicate responsibly a message and will avoid the ones which are not responsible.

In advertising, you can lie once. The second time people won't believe you. That is why the accent is being set not on deceiving the consumer but on determining him/her to buy a certain product, choosing from the existing ones.

The value of advertisements mainly consists in offering the information to the consuming public. The advertisement is the way we find out about new products and services. The reasonable persons look at the advertisement somehow with skepticism, due to the fact that the advertisement presents a product and there are simply too many products for us to know them, use them or afford them. We know there are many types of detergents, all of them competing to get our attention. Some of them will emphasize the low price, others the way they wipe away the stains. Probably no one agrees textually to the whole advertisement, even if it's true, because there is something called "the consumer's choice", and our choices are based upon our needs, interests, revenues and other factors.

An efficient advertisement means selling of products and services. Their selling means keeping the jobs or increasing their number. Increasing the number of jobs determines the growth of living standards for many people. This consequently determines an increase of buying capacities of good and better products that improve people's lives, although they can afford their access to

⁴ B. M. Amalancei, "Finalitatea comunicării publicitare: minciună, trădare, manipulare, seducție?," *Revista Română de Semio-Logică*, www.rosfir.usv.ro.

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services that make life easier, happier. They will have a better performance at their job and may be much more useful to society throughout their creative activity.

The advertisement allows the existence of television, newspapers and radio, internet and sports events, all of them offering satisfaction to people.

Only 8% out of the Egypt consumers, 40% from France and 50% from Denmark see the positive and useful effects of advertising, unlike the consumers from Norway or Bulgaria, that in 80 % appreciate communication. A big contribution to this it has the quality of messages and their frequency of transmission.⁵

For the states ranking with the greatest consumers' trust in advertising the first two, with 67% are Brazil and Philippines, on the third place with 66% is Mexico, on the fourth place with 64% -South Africa and on the fifth place with 63% -Taiwan. The ranking for the least confidence towards advertising is the following, on the first place is Denmark with 28%, and the next are Italy with 32%, Lithuania with 34% and Germany with 35%.⁶

A study realized by Leo Burnett in 1998 shows that only 7% of Romanians consider advertising as objective and providing the realistic information about the products.⁷

Conclusions

Generally, the common attitude towards manipulation could be summed up, more seriously or joking, in a phrase like "manipulation, manipulation, but let us know about it" ...

Not always things are what they seem to be ... There are people who are trying to guess, "what hides behind" the things they see and hear, the images and the words, and when this is or not the case. Some people state "we know that we are being manipulated, we are manipulated all the time, we don't even imagine the size of this manipulation".

In our country the slogan was launched by the information media themselves or especially by these, in the beginning '90s. Manipulation was so popular that it became almost a vital component for the post-communist collective imaginary.

⁵ H. Chee and R. Harris, "Global Marketing Strategy," Financial Times and Pitman Publishing, 1998, in N. Al. Pop, I. Dumitru, *Marketing internațional*, Uranus Publishing, Bucharest, 2001, p. 318.

⁶ www.dailybusiness.ro, 1 noiembrie, 2007.

⁷ A. Stoiciu, *Cum să convingi un milion de oameni – manual de marketing și publicitate*, Ziua Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 17.

The “wise” viewers believe they read the signs of the manipulation intention (that they baffle, of course) not only in the TV images, but also in the text, in the comments of editors and guests, either in their mimicry, gestures or the showmen’s voice... (“the look he/she had!”, “the way he/she said it!”...). When it comes to presenting the information about an event, in a group, invariably it gets to the statement “we are being manipulated, there is no doubt!”, “all of them manipulate, all of them misinform”, but also to “they don’t full us anymore”, “it’s not so easy anymore”, “we are getting wiser” (the reassuring feeling...)

What “wise” viewers see that speaking about manipulation is a certain “politic attitude” of the television channels, of the press in general, either locally, on the axes “power-opposition”, or globally (“pro-Americans” – “pro-Europeans”).

The connoisseur public is more and more numerous and expanded – an interested public and with great openness towards information, with judgement spirit, capable of comparing, with more and more obvious abilities for communication, that is expressing their opinions. This doesn’t mean that the public is immune to manipulators’ actions; although, acknowledging the existence of the phenomenon is a first important step, even if it’s limited to relatively restraint segments (although not as restraint as they seem). It is for sure that the public has “to face” a growing number of images, of gathered representations about the world. The problem that shows up is: how to learn to analyze and to select the information from mass-media, how to discover reality besides the appearances?

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