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ADVERTISING AS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: THE REPRESENTATION OF SEXUAL MINORITIES

Nowadays, advertisements whether in print or digital form represent an everyday phenomenon in the Western society. Furthermore, advertising is gradually transforming from a mere conveyer of information towards subsumption of social sphere of our lives and thus it propagates lifestyles, emotions and identities. Advertisement is also considered one of the message forms of intercultural communication. Based on these premises and in combination with co-cultural theory, the article points out how gay men as a historically marginalized group are portrayed within the confines of mainstream advertising. The article concludes that the portrayal is targeting a specific group of gay men and that it is reinforcing both racial power dynamics and traditional gender roles.

Keywords: *homosexuality, co-cultural theory, advertising, representation.*

Nowadays, advertisement can be encountered almost anywhere – whether in print or digital form, in newspaper, on street, television, internet – the range of possibilities and forms is virtually limitless. Traditionally, advertisement is understood as a notice of goods sold or services provided [8, p. 6], or just the means of «drawing attention to something» [7, p. 2]. However, by settling on such a definition of advertising, a whole world of signification serving as a testimony to the myths of our current age would be ultimately lost. Already in 1957, Roland Barthes conducted several semiotic analyses of French advertisements, and was the first to employ the term “myth” in connection with advertising [5, p.114]. A myth is a second-order semiotic system as the meaning of the original semiotic system (i.e. Saussurean sign) is suppressed but

not forgotten and such emptied sign enters a new system of signification gaining more complex meaning [5, p. 115]. The textuality of advertisements is conveyed through signification systems consisting of two levels – the denotative and connotative ones. Reading of advertisement on the denotative level, also termed diegesis, requires only basic anthropological knowledge [16, p. 121]. Inadvertently, just like the signs in language [10, p. 88; 17, p. 6], the meaning of such a system is arbitrary, ambiguous and in order to decode it on the connotative level, the spectator must be in possession of a specific cultural knowledge [16, p. 121]. Beasley and Danesi distinguish between different forms of advertisement based on a rational-irrational dichotomy. i.e. whether its purpose is to provide information or emotions. [1, p. 11], However, it is a matter of discussion whether such distinction is still relevant as is illustrated further on in this article. Ever more frequently utilized, advertorial is a peculiar form of advertising strategy, which combines advertising purpose with editorial form [19, p. 338].

Advertising in its current form is not short of criticism as many claim that it creates false wants, encourages consumption and sustains anti-social emotions [4, p. 3]. As Lipovetsky maintains, advertisement underwent a transformation through three stages of consumerism. In the current third stage, the western society experiences an explosion of consumption, yet the consumption is no longer motivated by prestige but rather by emotions which are associated with the consumed products or services [12, p. 14]. Furthermore, consumerism has been gradually subsuming ever larger portions of social spheres of our lives, which caused the rise of hyperadvertisement [12, p. 10]. Hyperadvertisement is spectacular, playful and constantly changing. While the differences in products and services are only marginal, hyperadvertisements offer dreams, emotions, artificial lifestyles and identities [12, p. 42]. It is no longer only the advertised product or service that is consumed, but also the identity offered through hyperadvertisement [11, p. 54].

As advertisement is considered a message form of intercultural communication [17, p. 38], the fact that it is capable of conveying identities makes it a fertile ground for representation of various co-cultural groups. Co-cultural theory examines how historically marginalized groups are interpreted within the confines of dominant groups. The theory is often utilized in order to uncover the interaction between power, culture and communication [15, p. 2]. It is based on the premise that the dominant group has the ability to create and use language whereas the co-cultural groups are muted, and thus voiced through the language of the dominant group [4, p. 354]. From this point of view, the study of representation of LGBT people within advertisement provides an interesting insight into the articulation of a group that gained greater attention only a few decades ago.

Before delving into the peculiar features which often accompany the representation of the gay community within advertising, two concepts should be mentioned – male gaze and queer gaze. Male gaze is a term proposed and constructed by Laura Mulvey within the confines of film theory. The concept is based around the premise that the spectator is a heterosexual man, and thus female characters are depicted as objects of desire whereas homoerotic portrayal of male characters is suppressed [13, p. 8].

However, the previous underrepresentation of queer characters has been connected with the queer gaze, which is based on the construction of queer identities through fragmented images [14, p. 47]. The incorporation of gay and lesbian consumers into market capitalism created new niche markets and opportunities collectively known as pink money or pink capitalism [9, p. 42]. However, advertising strategies employed in pink capitalism are criticized for mainly focusing on a specific type of customers that are white, urban, affluent, middle-class gay men, which further intensifies gender, racial and class hierarchy within the LGBT community [9, p. 47]. Such portrayal is a typical case of the regime of commodification which creates a hierarchy of identities based on their monetary gain [5, p. 145]. The regime decontextualizes identities, establishes an illusion of equality whereas disregards more controversial issues [5, p. 147]. Despite this criticism, gay men continue to be depicted in a range of different roles depending mostly on the field of advertising. While young and handsome men are still predominant, advertising has shifted towards representation of gay men of different ages and ethnicities, as married couples or even as parents [5, p. 49]. When it comes to race and gender, homosexuality - whether male or female – is represented through modes which sustain the relations of subordination and domination with respect to race [6, p. 127]. Similarly, the representation and rhetoric of gay men in advertising tends to reinforce traditional gender roles [6, p. 129].

In connection with male homosexuality, Baker and Balirano categorized advertisements into three areas. In the first one, homosexuality is portrayed in an amusing and stereotypical way (i.e. gay men are effeminate or drag queens). Such portrayal is predominantly utilized in heterosexual marketing. More subtle is the situation in which it is hard to determine the sexual orientation of the protagonist and the message may be decoded differently for heterosexual and gay consumers and thus it does not risk the alienation of both. This form of advertisement may rely on the use of camp, which is a secret language of gay subcultures, and thus relies on the afore mentioned queer gaze. The latter, often called out-of-the-closet advertising, is explicit in its portrayal of homosexuality, though, unlike in the first option, in a positive way and is predominantly utilized in homosexual marketing [1, p. 46]. What must be also taken into consideration is the sphere in which advertising is utilized (social or commercial). While social advertisements are targeting for greater acceptance of LGBT people and thus portrays them in their diversity, commercial ones aiming to influence gay consumers are often portraying particular group of younger and progressive consumers [1, p. 47].

As is illustrated in this article, advertising serving as a message form of intercultural communication constitutes a valid material for scientific analyses of the representation of different co-cultural groups. Among the many historically marginalized groups, this article focused on the representation of gay men in mainstream advertising. This co-cultural group has been voiced through the language of the dominant group in such a way as to conform and sustain heteronormative representation. The most visible feature of such representation is the predominant focus on the portrayal of white, young, urban, affluent middle-class gay men. The portrayal of male homosexuality is

conforming towards the sustainment of traditional gender roles and racial hierarchy. Furthermore, the most dominant forms of representation of gay men are either through ridicule or through usage of camp, which may be decoded differently depending on the spectator's sexual orientation. In conclusion, it must be also pointed out that recent years have seen a shift towards more inclusive portrayal of gay men.

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