

**ADVERTISING AS HYBRIDIZATION OF CULTURE AND ECONOMY: THE
PATTERN OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION CONSUMERISM**

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Abstract: In its unremitting quest for the destination of an 'all-encompassing' communication, advertising builds an image of complexity and oppositions. Constructed as a mingling of cultural values, intensive economic consumerism and creative touches, the story of advertising is a never-ending analysis of nowadays globalized societies. It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to explore and analyze the congruencies and disparities between advertising and its social, cultural and economic repositories. In this respect, at least two questions can be formulated: what is the position of advertising in between its two parents- economy and culture-is it a hybrid or rather is it a subdivision of one or the other? Moreover, how does advertising pertain to organizing its communication with the overly globalized consumer markets? The current paper outlines the framework of reference for advertising- in between economic production and consumerism, on the one hand, and the consumers' cultural behavior, on the other hand. However, communicating a socio-economic European identity is not enough to address the consumer, who has transformed into a global one. Therefore, the paper also focuses on the differential treatment of advertising: standardized versus adapted, in view of presenting the implications of distinct advertising approaches in contemporary expanding and soliciting markets.

Keywords: advertising, consumerism, socio-economic identity, standardized advertising, global consumer.

By projecting the image of advertising domain unto the field of socio-economic representation, the illusion is that advertising occurs as an undetermined segment of marketing which unremittingly postulates impulses in view of expanding the production and consumption cycle. Such a summarized account would undoubtedly serve as founding ground for any debate focused on the implications and consequences that come attached to advertising, without, however, managing to set an encompassing context for a more thorough analysis. Consequently, in order to discuss the status of advertising as a complex entity it is salient to envisage it as the outcome sprung from the merging of what might seem separate and unbound territories, respectively culture and economy.

Located in between the two, advertising bears the imprint of both social constructs generated by the cultural sphere and production items forged by the economic world, adjusting to one or another in accordance to its representation scope. Hence, a plethora of subsequent issues appear at the level of identifying the meaning and dimension of advertising. If, indeed, advertising is the bilingual speaker of culture and economy, whose influence weighs heavier upon it? Do the two instances clash in their voyage to represent products to culturally plural societies? And if so, what type of identity can advertising communicate so as to acknowledge both sides? Needless to say, this governing dualism embodies a plurivocal discourse that casts advertising in the midst of a tormenting dilemma: is it a distorting or a distorted mirror of reality?

The multiple hypostases that define advertising and that allow for a fit combination between the socio-cultural and the economic significances are frameworks for the interpretation of communication in advertising. Furthermore, there are several sets of binary oppositions that are simultaneously generated and integrated within advertising: meaning and

reality, subjects and objects and, respectively culture and economy. When analyzing the contents of advertising in terms of economic and cultural premises, it is impossible to neglect the semiotic framework, responsible for the decoding apparatus. However, the object of the current debate departs from such instances of deconstructive critique and aims at relating contemporary consumption to the fields of economy and culture as guidelines for advertising.

Contemporary consumption, which is “all about the desire for difference and expression of identity through the display of sign values”¹ is the stringent element in advertising, both producer and demander of the distorted and distorting images. The process imposed by the sign values’ exchange² stands valid especially at the level of culture-economy pillars that are reunited by advertising through consumption. In this respect, Andrew Wernick’s account brings to light a significant observation: the cultural superstructure has become absorbed into the economic base- the former as the zone of circulation and exchange and the latter as zone of production, becoming, in its turn, a cultural apparatus.³ This way, advertising can be read as currency for trading the symbolic meaning of products and services with the assurance that consumers will proceed to purchasing the actual products. Nevertheless, it is salient to assert that neither culture nor economy represent stable entities, but rather they are constantly-changing spheres of action that reorganize social life.

Given that any conceptualization of advertising starts with culture and economy, a stringent aspect that requires attention would be to establish which of the two actually conveys the influence over advertising. However, since both are responsible for the processes of production and promotion it only seems fair to evaluate the direction of influence from both sites. If advertising is to be imagined as the information vehicle that unites culture and economy, the problem of influence manifests much importance especially due to the difficulties that occur in defining the vast field of advertising. Likewise, if economy, per se, is the main factor in determining the status of advertising then the mechanism of promotion becomes a mere machine that conveys standard and culture-deprived meanings. Consequently, both sides must be taken into account so as prove that advertising is both art and science.

On the one hand, keeping as valid the premise that the influence axis stems from the cultural spectrum, one needs to read the cultural impact upon advertising not only as guiding pattern but as a coercive force. Scott Lash and John Urry’s⁴ analyses, which state that influence actually runs from culture to economy might appear initially as a disparate point of view precisely because their positioning of economy is beyond the common ground that nowadays society offers it. The major concern that the two authors postulate is that economy

¹ Liz McFall, *Advertising a Cultural Economy*, SAGE Publications, London, 2004, p. 13

² Jean Baudrillard, in “The System of Objects” 1988, claims that the scope of advertising is to engage in a quest of meanings that are latent in pre-existing cultures and are remnants of past trends and fashions inserted into the cultural whirl. Once it has taken notice of such premises advertising performs transformative functions upon the meanings and adapt them to nowadays society in an effort to draw more personal and attractive features from them. Consequently, according to Baudrillard there is a historical transformation function that advertising gains, due to the fact that it manages the evolution of meanings throughout time in a format of adaptation. Therefore, the exchange takes place from one period to another and from one meaning to another in the framework of advertising.

³ According to A. Wernick, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*, 1991, SAGE Publications, London, 1991, p. 19

⁴ In *Economies of Sign and Space*, SAGE Publishing, 1994

has been increasingly “culturalized” and submitted to “knowledge networks” and, consequently, has lost the hegemony of influence. Particularly, their thesis states that advertising pertains to its role as technology and allows for a smooth transition between societal organizations based on the cultural constructs issued by society.

Moreover, cultural influence appears, in a more visible manner, at specific stages in the cycle of advertising, namely, when consumer choices are issued. The marketing impulses thus sent through advertising reach consumers only in the cultural context, that is, only provided that their wants are in accordance to the trends conceived by the contemporary (pop)culture. Also, the cultural frameworks function as resistance, or, on the contrary, as a resource for behavior motivations, influencing therefore the purchase of products and, implicitly, the advertising consumption.

On the other hand, the responsibility that the economic system bears over advertising is crucial in its own terms. Investing incommensurable funds in the art of promotion, economy turns advertising into an industry of its own by setting the connections with the rest of economy branches: media, sales, statistics or marketing. In fact, “advertising unites production and consumption by improving the capacity of the production sector to add the values that will best facilitate exchange”⁵. This translates into the fact that advertising, through the unified support of economy, is both a messenger and a voice-bearer, due to its production of pure consumption.

The main advantage that advertising brings for economy is its status as channel of expansion. Since the economic creed is a universal one and aims at expanding markets through globalism, advertising’s function is not only to spread the news, but also to unite in thought. That is, by advertising products, especially through standardized techniques, consumers are faced with making choices in a virtually unlimited array of possibilities. In reality, this “unlimited” becomes quite a “limited” construct, as the monopoly of specific brands and powerful companies impedes a proper dissemination of alternatives. Likewise, advertising is responsible for “burdening” the consumer’s mind with promising and universally appreciated ideas of products, and, consequently, for achieving the consumption ratio.

Envisaging the “mirror of reality” compound built as a framework for culture and economy it is mandatory to elaborate on the two branches that are attributed to advertising: *distorted* and *distorting*. The effect of *advertising as distorted mirror* engulfs the reflection, through marketing, of specific values and lifestyles that translate as momentary and superficial facets of a pop-culture society. Particularly, the economic demand- an equivalent to the wants of the consumers- mirrors merely an exclusivist part of society’s needs; therefore it is not an accurate, nor complete reflection. Accordingly, advertising becomes an emblem of marketing strategies meant to appease specific needs issued by biased societies. On the other hand, *advertising as distorting mirror* refers to the way in which advertisements impose standards that do not correlate to reality, but, rather, that set guidelines for further lifestyles and trends. The distorting mirror will thus equate a culture that is permanently expanded and pushed outside boundaries, in which culture values represent differential meanings that consumers decode from advertising messages. Advertising is "not a true mirror but a

⁵ Liz McFall, *op. cit.*, p. 85

Zerrspiegel, a distorting mirror that would enhance certain images."⁶ Such a Zerrspiegel, however, provides a selection of the visual field: what is advertised is the outcome of a thorough process of selection and evaluation.

Needless to say, advertising inhabits a crucial intersection between economics, culture, media, and society that stands at the center of important social processes. Its power is multifaceted: it becomes a challenging discourse in permanently shifting symbolic environments, which shapes consumption, together with form and content of media and behavior. The fact that advertising is associated with an institutional context nowadays is precisely a consequence of the many societal contracts that are created within the culture-economy cycles of production and consumption. The numerous virtual relations thus created between media, businesses, society and products are much institutionalized so as to fit the message that advertising's competence can deliver. But most importantly, this hybrid and persuasive construct becomes the device that offers consumers a basis on which subjects resort to consumption as the "crucial terrain upon which they negotiate their social identities."⁷

Regardless of the prerogatives that govern interdependencies in the field of advertising, the central perspective that is hereby formulated is the one referring to the function of communication. As shown previously, advertising *communicates* via its meanings and codes that convey a plethora of messages from economy towards culture. The opposite trajectory is also valid: once culture defines society's wants in terms of identity recognition and preference trends advertising *communicates* backwards how the products and services of economy can fulfill the cultural desires and needs. In this spinning whirl, the focus is, without doubt, on the ambivalence that defines the communicative function of advertising, since it is the only mechanism that bridges economy and culture, without discrimination. Such a spectrum of interconnections creates an incognito terrain in which cultural identification forges a proper framework of analysis, which, for advertising, is tantamount to addressing the authority of consumption through a multicultural discourse.

The global consumer at crossroads: cultural identification versus standardized advertising

That society is nowadays under the spell of an all-encompassing globalization charm is no longer a hypothesis but rather a verified truth. The spectacle of economic progress and omnipresence has spread in any real and virtual space of the world, claiming its hegemony and demanding a fair share of the consumption frenzy. Even though, in recent years, globalization has often been associated with clichés, the phenomenon still counts as a stringent reality that insists on "universalism" and branding in the detriment of local productions and markets. In an effort to substitute such a potential danger with a less harmful prospect of future development, specialists have come up with the "think global, act local"⁸

⁶ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity*, University of California Press, 1985, p. 69

⁷ *Idem.*, p. 197

⁸ First coined by Patrick Geddes in *The Evolution of Cities* (1905), the syntagm bears the significance of business strategies that allow the convergence of both the "global" and the "local" into a common terrain (later establishes as "glocalism"). The leading principle behind it is that the best means of achieving success in a globalised world is to merge world-recognized strategies, techniques, products- therefore commodities- with local, cultural and

formulae, which, at least momentarily, does carry solid ground. However, globalization pertains to influencing every branch of economy, regardless of the presence of cultural and local factors in the respective products.

One of the most solid voices that bear the print of globalization is found in intercultural advertising, in which heterogeneity and perspectives must be feasible attributes. The manner in which advertising is thus molded by a globalised culture is relevant to understand the means in which it addresses and transmits a global message to various and different entities. A valid definition for intercultural advertising could be the following: “advertising for a product which is defined as originating from one particular social, economic, linguistic, political, cultural context that takes place in and- perhaps most importantly-is directed at other social, economic, linguistic, political, cultural contexts.”⁹ Therefore, advertising is expected to accomplish a two-sided transfer of messages within similar or distinct communities, without any alteration of the meaning but with accurate referral to individualities.

The protagonist in this circle of advertising, culture and economy is the addressee of the message –the consumer, whose motivations, expectations and requirements mingle in the process of communication. Both a subject of the cultural enterprise and an object of the economic projects, the consumer seems to be cast away in an array of disparities between the cultural realities and the promising products that advertising brings forward. The question that arises, therefore, is what strategy can best serve the consumer so as to address, in a politically-correct manner, the entire spectrum of influence? And, more importantly, how can advertising thoroughly communicate and convince the consumer without altering the intended globalised meaning of the product?

There are three main directions in which advertising can approach the message delivery: *standardization*, *adaptation*-that is the cultural-local choice and the *compromise alternative*, which combines the previous two schools of thought. The current context, guided by a solid cross-cultural interaction, establishes, nevertheless, a hierarchy in the production-consumption field, which results in a necessity to carefully choose between advertising strategies. Using standardization techniques to advertise products in areas that are remotely apart from the “global archipelago”¹⁰ would only function in the detriment of the product. Instead, a culturally adapted advertising would improve the market position because the consumer appreciates the direct approach. Likewise, a compromise solution- one that combines the standardization benefits with the local authenticity- would be welcome in developing countries that aim at globalised markets but still cling and value their local production.

social trends- therefore cultural values-and to forge a mechanism in which the two function and complete each other. Needless to say, such a mixture is always partially biased, as either the economic or the cultural counterpart will, at some point enhance more representation and wreck the desired balance. Nonetheless, the merging seems promising in as much as it prevents the expansion of globalization and the consequent suffocation of the local.

⁹ Helen Kelly Holmes, „Bier, parfum, kass. Language Fetish in European Advertising“, in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3, 2000, SAGE Publications, p. 68

¹⁰ Mattelart uses this term in “An Archeology of the Global Era : Constructing a Belief” in *Media, Culture and Society*, No. 24, 2002, p. 607 , together with “techno-apartheid global economy” to designate the concentrated area of highly-developed countries, with access to technology, information and economy boom.

In order to understand the mechanism of functioning for the three alternatives, it is mandatory to sketch a profile of the global consumer and his reactions to the advertising lure in each case. This could indicate a potential solution to a major dilemma latent in the marketing sector: “whether consumers from different countries will become more and more alike or whether the differences will remain stable or even will grow more.”¹¹ If advertising is believed to be responsible for the future changes in consumer behavior, it must be said that the implications travel far beyond, into the structure of markets and consumption patterns. For this reason, whether advertisers resort to standardized, culturally adapted techniques or take the compromise way becomes a matter of utmost importance.

It has become a truism to affirm that the purchase and use of trendy goods is a way of stating one’s social identity and of communicating it to others. The role of advertising as mediator of message is, likewise, a theory that supports the consumer’s position in the globalized market, because, this way, the consumer is a conformist subject assimilating the subliminal messages of advertising. Trapped in a “no time and perpetual year zero”¹², the consumer is a spectator to the way in which marketing and advertising continuously modify the ideas, goods, images and “the new”. Consequently, the consumer is subject to this expanding change and is required to adapt his wants and needs in strict accordance to what the pop culture and the social status dictates. By trusting the advertising creed, costumers and consumers engage in a quest of social definition and self identification with the patterns imposed by economy and marketing strategies. Authenticity is no longer the primary scope in one’s identity, but rather the belonging to a larger, global, culture that locates the individual among masses is desired.

Considering that globalization, through advertising, is a major factor that shapes the consumer’s needs and purchase impulses, one could fall under the false impression that customer markets are similar to puppeteer shows, in which what is said and indicated becomes a rule for the community. Nevertheless, there is more to the profile of nowadays consumer that must be taken into account. Namely, advertising’s public is, by comparison to markets half a century ago, a highly culturally diverse space, with specifically oriented identities and cultures. This matters because, even though the same goods and services can be objects of desire for a culturally diverse customer base, the message of advertising must be a culturally adapted strategy that allows intercultural communication.

Diversity becomes, therefore, an essential component of the buyer-seller relationship in the context of advertising because it refers to how distinct cultures can be addressed in such a way as to facilitate a continuation and success of the economic production cycle. In this respect, a genuine approach is the *adaptive selling behavior*, which translates as “the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation.”¹³ Obviously, this selling

¹¹Gabriela Sauciuc, *Cultural Values in Danish Advertising*, available at <http://www.limbistraine.com/ro/cercetare/Gabriela-Sauciuc/Cultural-values-in-danish-advertising.html>, accessed 12/03/2014

¹²Anne M. Cronin, *Advertising and Consumer Citizenship: Gender, Images and Rights*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 14

¹³Barton Weitz, Harish Sujan and Mita Sujan, *Knowledge, Motivation and Adaptive Behavior: a Framework for Improving Selling Effectiveness*, 1986, p.175, apud. Bush, Victoria D, Rose, Gregory M, Gilbert, Faye, Ingram, Thomas N. “Culturally Diverse Buyer-Seller Relationships: The Role of Intercultural Disposition and Adaptive

attitude can easily be adapted to advertising, which transforms the message, based on the nature of the customer market and by use of intercultural communication competences. Intercultural communication and, respectively, the cross-cultural approach that advertisements use when addressing a heterogeneous market, permits the customers to decipher and interpret the intended messages through their own cultural filter. Since advertising is highly affected by the manner in which intentions, expectations and information are communicated, the consumer constructs his/her own personalized world in the context of the globalised society. Accordingly, the globalised consumer is not an entity deprived of individuality and local flavor, but rather one that mixes the two and shapes new dimensions for an altered market.

The debate of whether to use standardized or multicultural advertising, and respectively, the compromise solution, has thus become a matter of utmost importance to advertisers. The heterogeneous customer market demands personalized goods and services, while simultaneously craving for world-recognized trends, which only makes the issue more difficult. Applying standardized advertising to such a diversified consumer market would seem superficial and useless, because it will mean a refusal of the expression of authenticity and a culturally-dry environment. Likewise, adapting advertising to multiculturalism also seems a hasty choice, because individualism focused on religious, lingual, cultural identities also sends to a loss of general norms and values and an over-diversification of the economic production.

There are, nevertheless, a series of occasions which favor either one or the other advertising strategy, each being in tight correlation with the customer market. Firstly, “standardized strategies and campaigns appear most appropriate and effective when the product is utilitarian and the message is informational”¹⁴, respectively when the main interest of the audience is to be informed and find out the basic characteristics of the product. In such a case, regardless if the customer market is a culturally diverse one or a homogeneous audience, advertising’s scope is one purely informative and deprived of cultural nuances.

Secondly, using the scheme of multi-cultural advertising applies in the case of growing brands, which require flexible and highly adaptable strategies. Particularly, if a company decides to launch a specific product/brand that is not a complete concept, it is necessary to build the advertising campaign in close relation with the profile of the targeted consumers, by responding to their cultural, national and social needs and expectations. Such an emotional and diversified appeal is stringent for a successful outcome, especially when considering the intercultural delimitations that mark the world globalised market into collectivistic and individualist nations or demonstrative and diffident societies.

Thirdly, the compromise solution is also a viable choice in advertising techniques, only if used accordingly to the profile consumer market. There are two directions that apply here: when advertising a global brand to distinct cultural societies, and when advertising a local and unique product to a homogeneous globalised market. The former implies that the advertising message is on behalf of world-renowned company, whose quintessential roots are known to belong to a specific location and is addressed to consumers located in other cultural

Selling in Developing Intercultural Communication Competence” in *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 2001, No. 29; 39, p. 391

¹⁴ “Global Advertising: Standardized or Multi-Cultural?”, in *Journal of Advertising Research*, No. 37, 1992, p. 32

places. For instance, advertising global brands such as Coca-Cola and Chanel, which are known to be American, respectively French exclusive products, to countries in Asia or Africa will require a compromise solution in terms of promotion, such as an advertisement that recognizes the global power of the brand, yet molds it to the local culture and shows how it can be personalized.

The latter case focuses on the advertising techniques used in promoting a product/service that is unique in its terms and needs to be made familiar with a large market that is strongly influenced by globalization. The advertising campaigns that apply to such cases are the tourism ads, which carry the message of local and cultural identity of a country and translate it, through images and coded visual messages, into a world-accessible and multi-facilities location. Both cases illustrate instances in which advertising is the middle ground between economic production and cultural societies, and, most notably, in which this terrain is split between a standardized alternative and a pluralist one. The customer, however, does not renounce his/her traditions and values with those of a changing society, nor does he/she fall prey to patterns imposed by globalization. Accordingly, advertising for such a consumer becomes a very complex and ambivalent procedure meant to satisfy one's needs even at the risk of breaking into his/her private culture.

Visualizing advertising as a hybrid between culture and economy is a never-ending great expectations story, whose climax is shaped by the occurrence and influence of the consumer. The fact that heterogeneous consumer markets are convinced by advertisements' messages can be explained by reference to conformity to a globalised society. Individuals, keen on their social status as a reflection of their identities, resort to engaging in the consumption frenzy to state their belonging to a common-sense, all-inclusive global society. Despite the aspect of multicultural advertising, the targeted consumers, be they astute on their cultural legacies, still require the same products and services, under distinct modifications, thus adhering to the globalised village they are unconsciously perpetuating. Eventually, the advertising scope is a contradictory one: on the one hand, it aims at a global economic accomplishment of consumption patterns, while, on the other hand, it is forced to address the messages in a polyglot and multicultural discourse. Since toying with customer preferences and speculating on economic future trends is no longer, in nowadays globalized society, the equation of success, the responsibility of advertising is multiplied. The outcome, however, also depends on several other factors that shape the imaginary universes that ads virtually build, such as local and international identity, the effect of the "made-in" process over advertising and, respectively, the formation of symbols in the advertising context.

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