

## CULTURAL ASPECTS IN ADVERTISING DISCOURSE

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**ABSTRACT:** *Advertisements are an integral part of people's life and culture. They react in a way to human concerns and cares by implementing global as well as culture specific aspects in their texts. They serve as a currency in everyday communication and reflect people's way of thinking and life, as well as the assumptions, attitudes and beliefs typical for the society they originate from. The paper presents Bulgarian and British ads, their specificities and the comments for and against some of the issues they touch upon because apart from selling goods and services they offer symbolic meanings, life styles and signs which can be identified only by people familiar with the respective culture the ads appear in. All this is done through linguistic manifestations and various ways of conceptualizing the world reflected in the analyzed ads.*

**KEYWORDS:** Advertisements, Culture, Conceptualization, Society

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### INTRODUCTION

Advertisements are definitely a necessary evil. They are an integral and indispensable part of people's life and culture. They are some kind of a reflection of human concerns and cares and somehow serve as a currency in everyday communication. Although we all pretend that we are immune to them, (un)consciously we tend to be too vulnerable and susceptible to their temptations. No doubt, some people would immediately react against this statement, as 20% of all people are against everything irrespective of the fact if it is good or bad. This statement was made by Robert Kennedy, the then US Attorney General, who in 1964 gave a speech at the University of Pennsylvania on the cultural and legal civil rights fight in 1960 and in relation to the existing prejudices in some people concerning the pre-election campaigns at that time. The exact quote is: 'About one fifth of the people are against everything all of the time' ([www.Thisdayinquotes.com/2011/05/about-one-fifth-of-people-are-against.html](http://www.Thisdayinquotes.com/2011/05/about-one-fifth-of-people-are-against.html)). Although the *joke*, as they call it, was uttered on a concrete occasion, it is used about politics nowadays as well. It is also valid about advertising which does its best to persuade or rather manipulate these 20% skeptically minded people in the advantages of the advertised goods.

### THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Advertisements as types of text pretend to be independent phenomena. However, they interrelate with other linguistic and cultural phenomena, the most outstanding of which is popular culture. In principle, culture is a multifaceted phenomenon which is rendered through the respective language and represents, together with this language, the ways of thinking and life, the assumptions, attitudes and beliefs typical for the society it originates from. Advertisements, as types of texts, loaded with culture specific elements, shape present-day culture as well as our ideas about us (see Frith 2006). It is pretty natural that they are related to other advertising texts and to texts from other discourses and genres. The impact of advertising in the contemporary global world is ubiquitous as there are a number of intertextual relations in the presented information which people are expected to identify so

that they can feel pleasure in reading it and in availing themselves of the products and services offered. In 2011 Sharifian introduces the concept *cultural linguistics* which studies the interrelation between language, conceptualization and culture (see [www.academia.edu/606529/Cultural\\_Linguistics\\_Farzad\\_Sharifians\\_Inaugural\\_Professorial\\_Lecture](http://www.academia.edu/606529/Cultural_Linguistics_Farzad_Sharifians_Inaugural_Professorial_Lecture)). In a similar way, Palmer (1996) stated that language is based on a culturally constructed imagery. It is successfully exploited in the construction of ads together with the conceptualization of the world rendered differently in different cultures (for more detailed information see also Todorova 2014).

## METHODOLOGY

For the present study we have applied Critical Discourse Analysis as well as Content and Comparative Analysis as they are interrelated in the same way as language is used for the manifestation of the respective culture in ads, though, as the study itself shows, apart from some very culture specific aspects rendered in the texts in question, there are some more global trends implied in some of the advertisements.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In connection with the reflection of social phenomena in advertising discourse and with the linguistic conjuring while rendering them, there appeared a couple of advertisements in 21<sup>st</sup> century Bulgaria, which caused a lot of debates and contradictory opinions. This fact speaks of itself that people not only read and watch ads but discuss them if they provoke their interest in one way or another.

One of the ads created by the Ministry of Finance, the Customs Agency, the National Association of Tobacco Producers 2010, the Association of Oriental Tobacco producers and Bulgartabak Holding AD was about smuggling. It appeared in the Bulgarian electronic and printed media in January and February 2015. Part of it reads:

Smuggling steals from you, from your parents, from your child's future.

Smuggling doesn't pay taxes.

Money from smuggling goes into criminals' hands.

Smuggling doesn't help increase the number of kindergarten seats.

Smuggling doesn't provide jobs.

Smuggling doesn't cover insurance for our parents' pensions.

Don't buy smuggled goods!

It harms everybody.

In this respect, there appeared different variations on this topic on the Internet, such as: "SMUGGLED CIGARETTES DON'T HELP"; or, a longer version as "SMUGGLED CIGARETTES DON'T HELP INCREASE THE NUMBER OF KINDERGARTEN SEATS.

DON'T BUY SMUGGLED GOODS! IT HARMS EVERYBODY” in which the words “smuggled”, “don’t”, “increase” and “smuggling” are crossed out and the message acquires a completely different meaning, as instead of “increase” the word “vacate” appears while instead of “smuggling” the word “cigarettes” is inscribed. Thus the new information goes as follows:

Cigarettes help increase the number of kindergarten seats.

Don't buy cigarettes! It harms everybody.

The Standard Newspaper from February 6, 2015 was not indifferent to the provocatively represented information and it placed a small part of the ad, but a fraction of it was changed a bit (in the nonverbal component a thoughtful elderly lady was depicted):

SMUGGLED

CIGARETTES STEAL

FROM THE PENSIONS

OF YOUR PARENTS

DON'T BUY SMUGGLED GOODS! IT HARMS EVERYBODY.

Immediately after that, the Internet published *forged* posters of the campaign with the image of Delyan Peevski (43<sup>rd</sup> National Assembly deputy from the Parliamentary Group of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, 2009-2013), discussions, etc. The headline of the poster was “Advertising, politics and active citizenship” followed by the subhead: “Would you help him buy more media?” The link with the discussed issue appears as a caption under the illustration: “Attention! When you buy (*illegal* is crossed out) cigarettes you sponsor organized crime.” What is more, in one of the articles “The loss for Bulgaria because of cigarette smuggling is the highest in the EU”, dating January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, citizens’ statement that “the campaign is a hidden advertisement of smoking and the very participation of Bulgartabak in it” is more than indicative. Apart from that, the president of the Council of Electronic Media (CEM) Georgi Lozanov announced for the Sega Newspaper that “citizens approached CEM about the campaign “Don't buy smuggled goods! It harms everybody” (see [www.vlastta.com/displaynews/83338](http://www.vlastta.com/displaynews/83338)). Active citizenship was reflected in the printed media as well, more specifically in the Standard Newspaper from March 20, 2015 under the rubric “Investigation” and the headline of the article was “Bulgarians like the campaign against smuggling”. The beginning of the article shows the positive attitude of the Bulgarians towards the campaign:

Most people find it interesting, truthful and easy to comprehend, a national representative survey of IPSOS, Bulgaria, shows... People don't think it contains scandalous images or that it leads to smoking...

This material is just another example of the interrelation between advertising and things of life. In all of the abovementioned ad messages there are culture specific aspects which will not be comprehended by other culture recipients. We should mention the fact that these texts do not contain the typical functions of *plausible denial* where the denial of something presupposes its approval and challenge for customers to avail themselves of the goods and

services offered (see Grin, Slobin 1976 for further details) as is the case with an ad about Air Canada services: “Don’t take our word for it. Check it for yourselves. Air Canada”. Advertisements containing some sort of denial express an appeal not to avail ourselves of something that is not good but is still done.

Two commercials promote UniCredit Bulbank services in this way. In one of them, untypical for the commonly accepted communication norms, a person is thankful for things which seem nonsensical:

I am grateful to the things that break.

I am grateful to my family for not being a wealthy person.

I am grateful to you for flooding my home.

I am grateful to the washing machine for breaking down.

I am grateful to my landlady for asking me to leave my lodging.

I am grateful to the lottery that I don’t win it.

I am grateful to the transition period for not being over.

I am grateful to the new age.

Count on us each time you want to count on you!

Consumer credit

UniCredit Bulbank (see <https://plus.google.com/+unicreditbulbank/posts/>)

In another UniCredit Bulbank commercial about mortgages, the text reads as follows:

Let’s imagine the world being a big block of flats.

In it Bulgaria would have been a small flat

Which many of us don’t like.

We don’t like the view, the floor plan...

That’s why many of us opt to live elsewhere.

But still many of us decide to live here,

Because only at home we are free to express our thoughts,

To pull down the walls we don’t like.

We can truly inspire ourselves and be together at home.

A home can’t change your life.

Unless you believe it can.

For those who are sure they want to live here.

UniCredit Bulbank offers mortgages

With clear conditions, easy procedures and thought for the future.

Life goes up and down.

We stay by you all the time.

Welcome to UniCredit Bulbank.

(see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6hiJ-0Ivow](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6hiJ-0Ivow))

In the ad the denial leads to the service offered, i.e. a mortgage: “A home can’t change your life. Unless you believe it can”.

What is definitely used in the abovementioned ads is conceptualizing Bulgarian society issues and representing different dynamic and socially constructed experiences related to everyday life. The complexity of the very conceptualization is due to the existing myths, stereotypes, traditions and symbols of the respective cultural community. These texts render human fates with their unresolved problems of the day. In principle, the conceptualization of the world acquires various dimensions due to different points of orientation, value systems and beliefs. Thus, the way of representing the world can coincide with its interpretation but it can also differ greatly as can be seen from the contradictory opinions of various citizens about smuggling. Linguistic manifestations and the way of conceptualizing the world are closely related to the thoughts and culture of the people from a certain society (see Sharifian 2011 for more details).

So, in a UniCredit Bulbank commercial about mortgages the conceptualization of home and family comfort is exploited. It is turned into a relative concept and changes in present-day life conditions. For example, for some people it is very unlikely for their home to change their life as they live in one place, work in another, and were born in a third one; they go on holiday abroad; go on business, etc. Quite often, the idea of home can be connected with physical space as well as with one’s belonging to a certain social or cultural group. In the ad, mentioning the fact that “many of us opt to live elsewhere”, before the recipients hear the next part of the text, they may decide that “elsewhere” refers to another place of residence. These presuppositions are immediately repudiated by the next statement which monosemantizes the preceding information “but still many of us decide to live here” (what is referred to by “here” is “in Bulgaria”, not in another country; author’s comment). Unquestionably, the dynamics of life nowadays blurs the boundaries between place of residence, home and value systems related to family, friends and colleagues.

The last two advertisements turn the burning issues of contemporary Bulgarian society into not that baffling ones against the background of the services offered by the banks. The lyrics of the song accompanying one of the ads which is, strangely enough, in English, coincides partly with the slogan of the ad: “Life goes up and down. We stay by you all the time”. The whole text of the song is as follows:

Life goes up and down.

Life is here.

Life is the sun.

Life is like the sun. (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=67MZhFCrDyE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67MZhFCrDyE))

In principle, it is quite natural for the models of the world in the various cultural communities to differ to a certain extent, though in some cases they can overlap or be more or less identical or coincide. What is of importance is that at the contemporary stage of development of society a lot of the pictures of the world can be easily borrowed from some cultures and, consciously or unconsciously be imposed on others.

The cultural codes in a concrete social community are always defined, judged and motivated against the background of global culture with its common human value systems as well as against the background of comparisons and juxtapositions between two or more cultural groups. Advertising communication, however, acts with a system of codes which in a number of cases does not have many touching points with reality; what is more, the boundaries between fiction and reality are quite often fuzzy (see Ivanov 2007). Besides, advertising agents use situations related to various social and cultural practices, value systems, myths and stereotypes on which they rely in selling their goods and services, as well as on the changing norms and views about the world.

Cultural specificity disappears and consuming of goods and services from other cultures as well as the problematization of cultural imperialism is realized much easier with the help of transnational iconography. Thus, things of life are presented in a similar way about cultural communities which are thought not to have any touching points but to unite in a way the communities comprised of, for example hard drink lovers. An example can be given with the *Tullamore Dew* Irish whisky commercial ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzkhDtr1ZuK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzkhDtr1ZuK)) and with *Kamenitza* beer commercial ([www.bulgaria.utre.bg/%202014/03/24/217374-greda\\_reklamata%20\\_na\\_](http://www.bulgaria.utre.bg/%202014/03/24/217374-greda_reklamata%20_na_)).

In both narratives, the situations in which the drinks are presented are the same – a wedding ceremony. In the whisky commercial, old friends gather together in a church yard where there are graves just before the wedding of one of them. The first impression one gets is that usually friends gather together to pay a last tribute to a friend who has died. But it turns out that the wedding ceremony will be in the respective church and friends treat themselves to a glass of whisky before the important event.

In the Bulgarian *Kamenitza* beer commercial, the typical wedding ceremony rituals are changed. Most often, the people closest to the bride and groom at the time of putting their signatures in the registry office are a man and a woman, usually a married couple. In this case, the wedding ceremony resembles western rituals where these people are the closest friends of the groom, i.e. the best men. The ad successfully imitates American and British films showing wedding ceremonies in a grotesque and distorted way, as what happens in some cases is something unexpected and unprecedented. In this narrative, the groom's best friends are not quite prepared for the wedding ceremony. They have forgotten the wedding rings but as almost in every western film there is always a way out. Part of the object of advertising replaces the missing one. In this commercial, the beer cap which has a hoop substitutes the ring. But, having in mind the fact that everything is possible in this type of text as long as it is interesting, entertaining and sensational, and nobody puts anything to the test

as for absurdities and oddities in the narrative, the ad can be approached from its humoristic and funny side and not be criticized by recipients in general and *Kamenitza* beer consumers in particular. Whatever happens in such commercials and in whatever strange way, the situations repeat the things of life to the greatest extent, refracted through the prism of the respective cultural communities in which the ad appears and is created for.

It is quite natural for advertising agents to use images of people who serve as carriers of figurative meanings and with whose help creative metaphors can be exploited, as is the case with beer commercials. In this respect, an idea is often conceptualized with the help of another (see Kaftandzhiev 2010: 18; also Lakoff, Johnson 2003: 155).

In support of this statement there is a *Guinness* commercial, broadcast on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 in YouTube, in which some friends play basketball in wheelchairs. The text reads:

Dedication. Loyalty. Friendship.

Voice over: Till next week, buddy.

The choices we make reveal the true nature of our character.

Guinness

Made of more

([www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwndLOKQTDs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwndLOKQTDs))

It turns out that in order for players to be on a seemingly equal standing (though only one of them is disadvantaged) all of them play basketball in wheelchairs. Here, we can raise the questions: Does all this really happen this way in life? Is it what really happens? We realize that Guinness producers support tolerance and true friendship, but there is one more rhetorical question without a real/true answer: If all this can really happen in a culture and become reality, can this culture be any culture we can think of? And yet another question: Would anybody like to witness such a situation provoking compassion rather than admiration in an advertisement? The commercial is definitely well thought of and the idea gives food for thought, yet there is always a *but*. This way of representing the product provoked a lot of comments in the social networks. There were statements *for* and *against*, in other words some supporters expressed their admiration of the text, while the opponents expressed their doubts about the false values behind it. One of the interesting opinions in which there were doubts about the ways of showing real values in life was:

If you got crippled tomorrow and had to use a chair, your friends wouldn't continue to hang out with you...? If so, you need to find a new group of friends; you deserve better, and I'm saying that not even knowing you... That's part of what's wrong with this commercial I think, although I can see why people like it.

There are cases in which the promoted product may not be of any interest to customers but the advertising message may be liked so much that it can serve as a currency in everyday communication regardless of the advertised brand and the intertextual references skilfully exploited in the ad but not always identified by the text recipients, as the ability for decoding the ad depends on knowledge about the information implied in it. Besides, the message must have been produced at a time and place different from the receiver's.

Thus, for example, “Oh, Pepi!” used rather as a greeting than anything else is not connected with the film it comes from (“The boy is leaving”) but taken out of its original context it refers to other signifiers from another context, that of *Leki* sausages ad, in which the object of attention is not a boy but the sausages. The two texts appear at different times but in one and the same place – Bulgaria. In this case, the hypotext is part of an old text which interacts with the new version, by reminding of the culturally specific narrative. Apart from pastiche, the information is built with the help of parody and there is heavy reliance on intertextuality as the exclamation is used not as a sign from the film but as a reflection based on the ad.

Sometimes the advertising message is so much intertwined with the things of life that the text recipient starts wondering what is actually advertised as is the case with an infomercial about *Slavi Trifonov* perfume in the *Egoist* magazine from 1996 where the question is: What does the text promote: Slavi or his perfume. The whole text consists of one or two sentences about the perfume; the rest of the narrative is about Slavi, the showman.

There are cases, however, in which an ad about a product which has been considered a fetish for a long time appears with a new slogan whose message is used in real life in a number of different attractive and entertaining ways. Thus, the Coca-Cola slogan “You can’t beat the feeling” appeared for the first time in 1988(9?). Or, as is mentioned in an article about the history of Coca-Cola advertising slogans: “Throughout the years, the slogans used in advertising for Coca-Cola have reflected not only the brand, but the times” (see [www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/coke-lore-slogans](http://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/coke-lore-slogans)). Right after it was published, it was put in circulation in public and was creatively exploited in a joke which spread in Bulgaria although it was imported from the UK. In this case, the time of production of both texts is one and the same, i.e. it coincides, but the spaces in which the second text was spread were different. The joke is as follows:

A boy and a girl live together. They love each other but the boy often beats the girl. One day he comes back home drunk as usual and beats the girl for no obvious reason at all. The girl just opens the fridge, takes out a coke and says: “I can’t feel the beating”.

The play on words in the joke will be understood only by people familiar with the intertextual linking, or, in other words, the correct interpretation depends on recipient’s previous knowledge about the information in question as well as the shared system of symbols attached to the advertised goods by the sender and the receiver of the message; it also depends on their preferences, and last but not least, on their knowledge of English. The text can be decoded in a given context, oriented to time and place. The time is the 1990s. Out of this context it loses its meaning, orientation and tease. The play on words will be interpreted correctly only by certain people, which speaks of the fact that the joke can be told only to certain audiences.

In connection with this slogan, or because of sheer coincidence, in 2010 Kylie Minogue performed one of her hits “Can’t beat the feeling” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsSHiHEE\\_Qw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsSHiHEE_Qw); [www.metrolyrics.com/cant-beat-the-feeling-lyrics-ky-lie-minogue.html](http://www.metrolyrics.com/cant-beat-the-feeling-lyrics-ky-lie-minogue.html)). Intertextuality in this case might have been deliberate, but it might have also been unconscious, or even simply missing?!? Some people can make the connection if they have previous knowledge about the two texts, or at least about one of them – the Coca-Cola slogan. Here is part of the song:



And I can't beat the feeling that I get  
When I'm with you  
My heart plays a rhythm in my head

I can't help but move

Two people synchronized

([www.metrolyrics.com/cant-beat-the-feeling-lyrics-kylie-minogue.html](http://www.metrolyrics.com/cant-beat-the-feeling-lyrics-kylie-minogue.html))

What matters in advertising is not so much selling a product or a service but the symbolic meanings they have for respective buyers and for consumers in general because, as was shown, the slogan starts circulating in public for various reasons and in some cases turns into a form of communication.

In 1990 the Coca-Cola slogan changed into "Can't beat the real thing". In this respect, in 1994 Andrew Wernick published an article in which he asked the rhetorical question "If Coke is the real thing then what is real?" If this is the drink from the advertisement or the one we buy from the shop. Again, things of life and the ad being part of this life intersect due to the cognitive models which help us build the links between the imaginary or represented worlds and the real ones. Or, as Roland Barthes (1991: 12) stated: „In the present-day person's mind the real object is substituted by its advertising image" (author's translation), i.e. every object is loaded with cultural associations.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Finally, to sum up, we can state that the research shows that advertisements as part of the commercialization of contemporary society, their commercial orientation, culture and things of life in general are so interrelated and inseparable that even if we do not want to admit that we depend on them, we should pay a well-deserved tribute and attention to them because of their entertaining and in some cases burlesque character (irrespective of the products they promote), but all this befits them.

The findings are just an example which can be used for future studies on a broader scale and can also serve as a background for analysis of advertisements originating from other cultures and/or expropriated on a global scale from a number of similar if not identical perspectives.

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