Teaching Advertising

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Abstract: The level of interest in the teaching of advertising has been distinctly modest to date in Italy, despite the considerable economic and social importance of this tool of communication. Only a few useful textbooks for teaching the subject have been published, but, more significantly, there has been no in-depth reflection on what specific approach and teaching methods should be adopted. This article seeks to start a reflection on what it means to teach advertising in universities, but also to ordinary citizens, who are usually major recipients of advertising messages today. The article attempts to analyze the main topics to address when teaching advertising communication, and looks at the tools required in order to teach these topics. It then considers the usefulness of the semiotic and social semiotic approach in teaching advertising. Finally, it examines the difficulties for teaching advertising posed by today's economic and social role of the brand, whose nature is particularly complex.

Keywords: advertising, education, semiotics, brand

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Introduction

In Italy, advertising started to be considered a serious subject of study in the 1990s. This was probably due to the rapid growth of advertising during the previous decade, which gave it a more visible role in society. Universities, which until then had held a largely hostile attitude towards the study of corporate culture, began to offer dedicated courses and specific degree programs on advertising. The subject was also introduced in secondary schools – mainly in those specializing in art but also in several "experimental" schools that prepare students for university. Despite this, very few textbooks for teaching advertising at university have been written in Italy in recent decades (Fabris, 1992; Lombardi, 2001; Ferraresi, 2017). Similarly, there are not many textbooks that can be used for this purpose in secondary schools.

The main problem, however, is that there has not been an in-depth reflection in Italy on what specific approach and teaching methods should be adopted when teaching advertising communication. The main goal of this article is thus to start a reflection on what it means to teach the nature and mechanisms of advertising in our universities. It is also important to consider that teaching the subject can benefit not only university students but also ordinary citizens, who are usually major recipients of advertising messages in today's hypermodern societies, characterized as they are by people's exposure to a rapidly growing quantity of messages in the main media channels. This is particularly true in the specific area of advertising and especially on TV, which companies still use as the main medium to advertise their products in the countless advertising spots featured during commercial breaks. This trend can be seen across all advanced countries, but it is especially strong in Italy, where it tends to produce a feeling of frustration and confusion at the social level. The effort to introduce educational programs to help adults improve their ability to analyze advertising messages can thus be regarded as a socially useful exercise.

In the pages that follow, we will discuss how the teaching of advertising can be approached in Italian universities. We will begin by analyzing the topics to be addressed when teaching advertising communication, and will go on to consider the tools required in order to teach these topics. We will then analyze the significance of the semiotic and social semiotic approach in teaching advertising – an extremely useful approach given the considerable analytical difficulties posed by the central role of language in advertising communication. Finally, we will assess the role of the brand in teaching advertising, which is a key aspect of this form of communication but whose nature makes it particularly challenging to tackle.

What topics to teach

We first have to ask ourselves what topics we need to address when teaching advertising, while bearing in mind that advertising is a particularly complex object of study. As a tool of communication, it has to fulfil multiple purposes since it is not an end in itself but is tied to precise corporate goals. In today's highly competitive markets, companies use advertising to pursue an extremely wide range of sometimes conflicting outcomes. They may use it in order to boost the popularity of a product, foster a positive attitude towards it, suggest a reason for buying it, deliver information about its quality, develop and retain customer loyalty, increase sales, create a lasting positive image, and the list could go on and on. A further problem is that, in addition to these goals, which are directly linked to the consumer's purchasing potential, there are also communication related goals connected with the nature of the advertising message as an expressive object. Such goals can include, for example, drawing attention, creating understanding and engagement, stimulating affective reactions, conveying emotions and, once again, we could go on and on.

We should also consider that in recent years, especially as a result of the changes brought about by the widespread use of the web and digital communication, the level of complexity of advertising has grown significantly (Panarese, 2010; Iabichino, 2010; Savarese & Gabriele, 2012; Mayer, 2015). We could say that advertising today is a highly diversified form of communication which is more complex and whose boundaries are more blurred than in the past (D'Amato & Panarese, 2016). When teaching the subject, we therefore need to explain the full complexity of the way in which today's advertising messages work. We should not simplify this complexity but provide effective tools to enable us to analyze the multifaceted relationship that advertising tends to establish nowadays not only with its recipients but also with social culture as a whole.

As pointed out earlier, advertising is first and foremost a tool of communication that is financed and employed by companies. Its main function is thus to fulfil economic goals, but it also constitutes an important system in itself from an economic perspective. It therefore needs to be explained primarily in terms of the way in which corporate organizational processes work, and of the professional roles engaged in its production. But, at the same time, it should also be studied in relation to the nature of the communication channels owned by the media companies that are used for advertising and which receive a crucial economic contribution from their advertising activities.

But, as previously pointed out, advertising is also a language. It should therefore be analyzed and taught as such, taking into consideration its com-

municative and expressive nature. This peculiar nature certainly poses greater analytical challenges compared to the nature of advertising considered earlier. But it is just as crucial because it determines the effects of advertising both on the individual company's business activities, i.e. the marketing effects, and those on the whole of society more generally i.e. the effects it generates for the cultural and social models that individuals usually adopt (Zanacchi, 2004).

The study of advertising can also be a useful tool for analyzing some of the topics addressed by other subjects taught in our universities. A number of Italian scholars, for example, have highlighted that the subject of advertising includes several topics that are highly relevant to the study of rhetorical figures (Calabrese, 2008), history of art (Salaris, 1986; Grazioli, 2001) and Italian literature (Sorge, 2000; Ghelli, 2005; Zaganelli, 2011).

This is particularly important in view of today's changing trends in the education systems of advanced nations, where there is a growing emphasis on the development of the individual's personal culture based on flexibility, creativity and critical skills. There is also widespread awareness that this particular culture is stimulated by the encounter between different academic disciplines. In this respect, the study of advertising messages, which involves combining perspectives from different disciplines, can provide an invaluable educational training ground.

What tools to use in teaching advertising

Given the complex nature of advertising communication, in order to study and teach the meanings expressed by this type of communication we need to use a wide range of analytical tools. Such tools are mostly found in the contributions from the various disciplines that have attempted to study the languages of the main expressive forms. In her book *Studiare la pubblicità. Teorie, analisi e interpretazioni*, Simona De Iulio has defined research on advertising communications as a "disjointed field of study" (2018, p. 14). She has thus attempted to organize it by classifying the numerous areas of academic research that have focused on the subject, including macroeconomics, management sciences, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics, political economy of media, law studies, history, aesthetics, history of art, literary studies and history of graphic design and visual communication. Moreover, according to De Iulio, the situation regarding advertising communication is further complicated by the fact that each of the research strands has proceeded in isolation, making no effort whatsoever to develop a dialogue with any of the other fields of research.

And yet, as we pointed out earlier, teaching advertising is important because it can be useful not only in university education but also for social

culture more generally. So, what can be done? Obviously, given the complex nature of advertising communication, we should adopt an approach that is as interdisciplinary as possible. Furthermore, the effectiveness of teaching advertising can be improved by adopting an approach that is as concrete as possible, setting out from a theoretical model of analysis and then going on to apply the model to practical cases. The standard case study approach can thus be a helpful tool in this respect and deliver good results.

When adopting this method of study, there are a number of books with advertising case studies that can be usefully employed for teaching purposes. They include the works of Marco Vecchia (2006), Gianfranco Marrone (2007), Riccardo Finocchi (2009), Vanni Codeluppi (2010), Cinzia Bianchi and Ruggero Ragonese (2013), and Giulia Ceriani (2018). Other case studies that can be used to teach advertising can also be found in the works of various Italian scholars who have studied the long and rich history of advertising in Italy (Ceserani, 1988; Falabrino, 1990; 2007; Codeluppi, 2013; Fasce, Bini & Gaudenzi, 2016).

Turning to the central role of language in advertising communication – an aspect of considerable complexity – there are a number of additional teaching strategies we can adopt. For instance, since in advertising messages we are mainly dealing with visual components, before breaking down such messages, whether they involve a still or a moving image, we should give an overall reading of them, letting ourselves be guided by what naturally catches our eye and stirs our immediate emotions. In the initial stage, these emotions can simply be noted, to be retrieved later on in the course of the analysis (Serre-Floersheim, 1993). The interpretation can then move to the next stage, during which the message will gradually unlock its contents. This involves a methodical observation where the various different components of the message are first analyzed individually and then re-examined together in order to determine the specific interactions of each with the others.

Advertising and semiotics

As is clear from what we have stated above, it is extremely difficult to develop an effective and universally shared method for understanding the way in which advertising communication works from the point of view of its language. It is nevertheless possible to put together and organize a set of analytical tools that will bring us close to achieving our objective. Such tools can be found in the contributions made by the various disciplines that have studied the languages of society's main expressive forms, notably psychology, sociology, anthropology and semiotics. Semiotics in particular – as the discipline whose specific focus is on studying the processes of meaning-making within society – is the one that has contributed the greatest

variety of tools for analyzing the languages of advertising, enabling us to break down and understand the meanings expressed by advertising messages (Volli, 2003; Traini, 2008). We can therefore make more extensive use of it, albeit within an interdisciplinary perspective.

We need to be aware, however, that semiotics suffers from a number of limitations. For many years, for example, it chose to adopt a rigid approach, focusing exclusively on the message as its object of study, thereby neglecting the relationship existing between the message and the context within which it operates. But other limitations have also been attributed to the semiotic analysis of advertising, including the fact that it relies too heavily on the interpretive skills of the individual analyst, that it cannot be applied with the same degree of success to all advertising communications and that the language and concepts it uses are overly academic and abstract. With the progress made in recent decades, however, semiotics has attempted to overcome at least some of these limitations. In this respect, thanks to the studies conducted by Algirdas Julien Greimas (1968; 1974; 1985) and his theoretical school – the so-called Paris School (Floch, 1992; 2016) –, semiotics today provides a systematic set of analytical principles and rules that are easier to apply. Even so, the discipline of semiotics continues to be characterized by a state of theoretical instability, partly due to the fact that not all scholars have adopted the generative model of semiotics developed by Greimas and his school. Yet, this lack of theoretical rigidity in semiotics is precisely what makes the discipline a useful tool in the study of advertising because it makes it flexible and adaptable to the multiple forms that advertising messages take today. Furthermore, for the purposes of analyzing advertising messages, there is no single theoretical approach that can be applied to every type of situation. Each form of communication has its own specific identity that requires to be examined using the analytical tools that are most appropriate to it.

Among the various research areas within the field of semiotics, the best results in analyzing advertising messages have been achieved by social semiotics. This is probably due to the fact that social semiotics has the capacity to break down specific messages into their component elements but also to consider them as an action, or an event, which occurs within a social context and acts upon it starting from actions that precede it and giving rise to further actions (Marrone, 1999). This makes it possible to analyze the actual life of advertising texts in society and their ability to contribute to the construction of social reality (Giaccardi, 1995).

We should obviously consider that the social semiotic approach, just like the semiotic approach, enables us to analyze the advertising message and to formulate hypotheses about the intentions of the emitter or sender of the message, and about the possible ways in which it is decoded by the recipient.

But such hypotheses do not necessarily coincide with the actual communication and reception processes occurring in society. To verify the latter we also need to use tools of empirical research. In other words, we need to conduct practical field testing to determine what effects the messages have produced on people's minds and on the social culture.

In order to conduct a linguistic analysis of advertising communication there are several interpretive models available to us. A useful model that can be employed for this purpose is set out in the book *Persuasi e felici? Come interpretare i messaggi della pubblicità* by Vanni Codeluppi (2010). The model takes the research carried out by Greimas and the Paris School as its starting point and makes the distinction between a static analysis, whose focus is on the form and content of the utterance (statement) or message, and a dynamic analysis that focuses instead on enunciative processes (or enunciation) concerning the workings of the utterance itself, which constantly seeks to establish a relationship with the recipient whom it addresses. These two types of analysis refer to what have long been regarded as the fundamental dimensions of any language, namely the syntactic (or form) and semantic (or content) dimension for the analysis of the utterance, and the pragmatic dimension for the analysis of the enunciation. Codeluppi's model then goes on to identify two levels (superficial manifestations and narrative) for the syntactic component of the utterance, and two levels (thematic and value-related) for its semantic component. It also offers some specific tools for analyzing the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic components, notably the actantial model, the semiotic square and the communication model of the brand. The company brand is a key feature of the communication activity carried out by today's advertisements and should therefore be given close attention when teaching advertising. But due to its complex nature and the considerable analytical problems it poses, it needs to be analyzed separately in our discussion, as we will attempt to do in the next section.

The problem of the brand

The brand should be seen as a subject with a multiple identity, which feeds on the ongoing dialectical relationship between its material and immaterial aspects and constantly defines and transforms itself during its evolution process. All the functions of the brand, both material and immaterial, thus contribute to building and enhancing its real value – what American marketing experts define as "brand equity" (Aaker, 1997). This value is particularly evident in the specific cultural worlds that the major global brands have started to build in recent years through sophisticated communication strategies (Danesi, 2009). Although these worlds do not exist in our physical reality, they are extremely engaging and seductive for consumers, to whom

they represent a clearly defined, concrete and perceptible reality. It has long been known that brands are very skilful in exploiting the media's capacity to "duplicate reality" by setting side by side with physical reality another reality which, although purely virtual, is just as real to people. This is achieved thanks to the communicative richness and intensity of the communication worlds of brands, which also seek to establish an ongoing relationship with the consumer through different tools of communication (pure advertising, direct marketing, marketing events, online communication, in-store communication, and so on). Moreover, these worlds are tangibly translated through the spectacular 'spaces of consumption' that company brands are increasingly creating today in the form of concept stores, restaurants, hotels, resorts, company museums, art galleries, theme parks, and so on (Codeluppi, 2014).

Some years ago, Andrea Semprini (1990; 1996) attempted to apply the notion of "possible world", previously developed by Umberto Eco (1979), to the communication worlds of brands. This expression refers to a cultural universe postulated by the reader of a text based on clues found within the text itself. This cultural universe has a narrative structure, contains values, actors and situations, and sets out a possible course of events. According to Semprini (1996), the possible worlds of brands are all chiefly characterized by:

- a fictional nature, which may also seem very close to everyday reality and can thus use realistic language;
- a high level of internal consistency, mainly with respect to the brand's past history and hence to the target audience's expectations of the world being represented;
- the capacity to produce a high level of differentiation from similar worlds created by competitor brands;
- the capacity to target a specific audience.

The concept of possible world, however, especially given its essentially narrative nature, should be viewed as far too limited if we consider the richness and strong communicative power usually displayed by the communication worlds of today's brands. Several authors have distanced themselves from Semprini's analysis. Gianfranco Marrone (2007), for instance, has argued that a purely fictional concept like possible world cannot be applied to the brand as the latter is so closely intertwined with the concrete dimension of people's everyday lives. According to Cinzia Bianchi, due to their plurality and rapid rate of obsolescence, brands should be attributed a different status from that of genuine narratives (2005, p. 101). Mauro Ferraresi, on the other hand, has suggested a solution by broadening the concept of the brand's possible world, pointing out that such a concept includes narratives, figures, verbalizations, visual texts, aesthetic aspects and emotions (2003, p. 120).

In order to study and teach the way in which company brands behave today, a more useful and effective concept to apply than that of possible world is the concept of brand imaginary (Codeluppi, 2001). Today's brands have the capacity to create a real "cultural imaginary". This is not something they build from scratch, but they develop it by appropriating a portion of the wider social imaginary. As studies conducted by anthropologists have clearly shown (Durand, 1996), the imaginary does not feed parasitically on people's experiential world but contributes significantly to giving meaning to that world. It is therefore very different from the purely narrative and fictional universe posited by the concept of possible world. It contains a narrative underpinning, but that narrative is laced with a host of additional expressive elements, including graphic signs, colours, music, physical spaces, and so on.

Marrone has also argued that the idea of possible world is usually conceived as an extremely closed reality, without any contact with the world outside. This is yet another reason why it is difficult to apply the concept to the reality of brands. According to Marrone, brands, like myths, talk to each other, and before developing their own internal coherence, they build and transform their identity in relation to complementary and competing brands (Marrone, 2007). In other words, their market strategy is based on differential positioning in order to make them stand out as distinct from and unlike any of the other brands. This is exactly what the concept of brand imaginary entails, which, as stated earlier, constitutes a portion of the overall social imaginary and, as such, constantly interacts with other portions of the imaginary, whether or not they are related to the brand.

The concept of brand imaginary is also based on the idea that brands suggest models of behaviour, lifestyles, aesthetic choices and even social and moral values for people to adopt. Indeed, the way in which the brand imaginary draws on such values is precisely what makes it so successful in practice. And it is increasingly clear that a brand with the ability to put forward values and suggest guiding principles to individuals becomes a highly influential social actor.

The brand emerged as a key tool of corporate strategy during the golden age of modern advertising, in the mid-20th century, when companies realized that it was no longer enough to simply promote a product, and that the product had to be associated with a powerful symbolic object endowed with a well-defined identity – the brand. But as brands have acquired growing importance, they have gradually expanded their links within the markets and the social and cultural environment (Cova, Fuschillo & Pace, 2017). We are thus increasingly also seeing some brands whose main goal is to be constantly interconnected with everything they can find within the environment in which they operate daily.

Conclusions

Advertising has frequently been accused of being a powerful tool of persuasion, a tool designed to manipulate people's consciousness through the actions of skilful "occult" persuaders. This was a widely held view in the West particularly during the 1960s and 70s, but even today many people still believe that teaching advertising means providing individuals with a set of conceptual tools which can easily be used to deceive others. We should be aware, however, that any tool can be used at will for morally negative or positive purposes. Hence, anyone wishing to use advertising as a means to manipulate people's consciousness will always be able to do so. But teaching advertising in the context of public education gives us the opportunity to spread knowledge throughout society of how advertising messages work, and consequently to offer many users some cultural tools that enable them to protect themselves from such messages.

However, it is also possible to try to teach people how we can create a different kind of advertising language. Emanuele Pirella, probably the foremost figure in Italian advertising, set up a small agency in Milan during his later years to train young people in advertising. He called it *La scuola di Emanuele Pirella* (The Emanuele Pirella School), and its aim was to convey the idea that it possible to develop a different kind of advertising. His approach is reflected in the following passage from his book *Il copywriter. Mestiere d'arte*:

We teach them irony and self-irony. We reveal our strategies and laugh about them together. The goal is not to sell the product with violence; it is to make people buy it. This is not a play on words. Selling the product means applying old rules and requires massive investment and lots and lots of pages to make people remember us. That is exactly what people hate about advertising. Making people buy our products is to make people choose us through affinity, love, desire and friendship. This is precisely what creativity is all about: it is the unexpected way to make consumers who desire our products go ahead and buy them (2001, p. 113. Our translation).

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