

MANIPULATION OF TEENAGERS THROUGH ADVERTISING: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE APPROACH

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Abstract: *The possible harmful effects of advertising in magazines aimed at teenagers have not lost relevance. Thus the aim of this article is to explore the linguistic characteristics used as foregrounding devices in a corpus of English advertisements aimed at teenagers. My underlying premise is that some linguistic messages or images convey information which is picked up by teenagers creating in them the desire to obtain certain products. In my analysis I attempt to ascertain, if any, what kind of linguistic control and what linguistic devices advertisers use to achieve their goal. Additionally, I try to find out to what extent the power of advertising has something to do with social problems related to compulsive consumerism, health disorders and behavior which affect teenagers. Hence, in my research, I gathered linguistic data from four magazine advertisements and identified the strategies used by prestigious brands to create in teenagers artificially constructed necessities on the basis of Donald Gunn's classification of manipulative techniques in advertising.*

Key words: *Advertising, discourse and power, manipulation, teenagers.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The possible harmful effects of advertising in magazines aimed at teenagers have never lost relevance. For this reason, an article published in the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* (4 October 2010) “revistas de adolescentes, ¿entretenimiento o basura?”, have recently warned about the sexist and mercantilist contents found in these kinds of magazines and suggest that parents and educators foster a critical reading. However, subtle promotions by means of, for instance, promotional presents, have called the attention of not regular readers, that is, persons who do not normally buy magazines or newspapers in order to read them.

The overall goal of adverts is to sell or at least, to make the public aware of their product and all the elements they are made up of are designed to contribute to the achievement of this goal. In other words, as Durán (1982) argues: “advertising is a phenomenon through which someone tries to communicate something to a group of people and whose aim is to persuade them to act in a certain way” (my translation). But, as Waller (1999:288) pinpoints, our society has become more and more complex and for this reason, advertising agencies “have become more creative to ‘cut through the cluster’ to gain awareness”. This fact has led them to include, for instance, sounds and images in TV ads which have subtly manipulated viewers (Pennock-del Saz, 2009:124). However, it is my aim to highlight the fact that viewers are not always consciously aware of the messages targeted at them.

However, some advertisers, perhaps, go too far and use their ads to manipulate people, whether they are adults or teenagers, the aim is to sell, no matter what or to whom, without taking into consideration if they are offering the right products to the right people as Philips (1997) claims in his book *Ethics and Manipulation in advertising*. But this is nothing new, it is also known that advertising makes people consumers by stimulating the tendency to consume and then guiding the particular product and service choices consumers make. We are offered all kinds of

products that seem to promise that we will be happier, richer, more beautiful or even younger, stronger, slimmer and so on. And if these adverts are aimed at adults, they will probably not believe every claim made by advertisers, nevertheless this is not the case when teenagers are the target of this message since young people, particularly girls, might be vulnerable to advertising messages.

One of the questions to be solved is about the honesty of the purposes of advertising. Bogart (1972) offered a good metaphor to shed light on this issue:

a knife does not have honesty in itself. When you get it sharpened you do not make it more honest or not. Persuasive techniques are like sharpened knives. They are tools and, of course, the person who deals with these tools should have honest principles.

Hence, to lay the foundations of the present article, I will start from the premise that some advertisements can do more harm than good to teenagers since some of them may be unable to understand advertising messages. This can lead them to think that, some messages are literally true. Moreover, advertising is getting more and more aggressive, this may be one of the reasons why some unhealthy eating habits like obesity (due to sugary or salty products) or at the other extreme, bulimia and anorexia (due to diet products) are becoming more common in our society. Thus, taking for granted that some advertising goes further than just providing information about their products to viewers, it is my aim to study the linguistic devices the producers of advertising use in adverts aimed at teenagers in order to create in them artificially constructed necessities.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this section, I will focus on the questions surrounding the concept of advertising from a twofold point of view: in general and regarding its manipulative features. In addition, I will overview the categories which adverts can be divided into and finally I will provide an insight into persuasion mechanisms.

2.1 Advertising creates unneeded necessities

Do teenagers really get baby-like skin by using the most expensive beauty creams in the market or slim bodies by simply eating and drinking “light” and “low fat” products? Vestergaard and Schroder (1985: 5) provide the answer to this question by explaining how consumers satisfy their needs by means of consumption:

We all need food and drink enough to keep us alive, clothes to keep us warm and dry, and, under most climatic conditions, shelter against the weather; except under the most favorable conditions people may need some means of transport to get from their dwelling to their sources of food. These are examples of material needs. It is hard to tell which are the most important. If our material needs are not satisfied, we die from hunger or exposure; if our social needs are not satisfied, we are liable to suffer psychological problems.

In turn, Downs (1985: 9) provides us with an example regarding ads aimed at the promotion of beauty products since “commercial advertising is a primary vehicle for attractiveness stereotyping”. Downs argues that huge quantities of money are annually invested into ads related to cosmetics, physical fitness and weight reduction. Due to this, children, and, by extension teenagers are constantly exposed to a “very high number [...] of attractiveness-based messages”, and what is more, they have a tendency to accept as real what appears on visual ads (either on television or in magazines).

In my view, it is clear that advertising is necessary (to a certain extent), as a social service provided to inform people; the problem perhaps arises when advertising makes us consume products which we do not need although the word “need” is a difficult concept to define exactly. Furthermore, adverts are often illustrated with pictures of happy people, happy because they have got this or that product. Taken to an extreme, advertising encourages us not only to objectify each other but also to feel that our most significant relationships are with the products that we buy. It turns lovers into things and things into lovers and encourages us to feel passion for our products rather than our partners (Kilbourne, 1999).

2.2 The power of advertising as control

Persuading the consumer to buy is the ultimate aim of the seller. Hence it is by means of the simultaneous use of verbal and non-verbal communication, linguistic and non-linguistic acts, that advertising reaches us and uses its power to attempt to control our desires, necessities and non-necessities. In other words, advertising is aimed at achieving social power as it is a business not a public service – which handles millions of Euros. This “social power” is called *control* by Van Dijk (2001: 355), which he explains in the following terms:

Groups have (more or less) power if they are able to (more or less) control the acts and minds of (members of) other groups. This ability presupposes a *power base* of (privileged access to) scarce social resources, such as force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information, culture or indeed various forms of public discourse and communication.

2.3 Manipulation through persuasion

The question is how the advertising industry is able to manipulate people’s desires, and the answer may be the juxtaposition of putting words and images together. As we know, people’s minds can cognitively decode what is expressed through language and, furthermore, language can be reinforced by images and these images are able to persuade - and what is worse, (to) manipulate - minds. If we talk about verbal communication, language in advertising is used carefully since the advert should not impose itself on the potential customer, because he or she is likely to react negatively to its message. It is made up of various illocutionary acts: assertive, comitives, directives, expressive and so on, the main objective of which is to influence the consumer’s behavior so he/she will buy the advertised product. This control through language is studied by critical discourse analysis, but in what way? Following the lines laid down by Van Dijk (2001: 352), talking about power as control, we can say that the context is the first thing to be controlled, advertisers decide not only on what is going to be launched and advertised but when, where, how and to whom. When all this is decided, then text and talk become the key but what mechanisms are being used to manipulate by mean of persuasion?

2.4 Persuasion mechanisms

Adverts, either printed or broadcast, can be categorized in a different number of ways. Vestergaard and Schored (1985: 1-3) make a distinction between non-commercial and commercial advertising. One example of the former is the communication campaign carried out by the government so as to prevent traffic accidents, or public appeals made by different football teams in order to get more supporters registered.

According to these same authors, commercial advertising may be divided into three groups: (i) prestige or good-will advertising, where firms advertise not a commodity or service, but rather a name or an image. “This type of advertising aims at creating long-term goodwill with the public rather than at an immediate increase in sales”. (ii) Commercial consumer advertising, which is “the most frequent type, the type on which most money and skill is spent, and the type which affects us most deeply”. (iii) Industrial or trade advertising (for example published in specialized

trade journals). “This type of advertising differs both from both prestige advertising and consumer advertising in that it can be regarded as communication between equals”.

In turn, Donald Gunn, a creative director for the advertising agency Leo Burnett divided ads into solely 12 types. According to Stevenson (2007), in 1978, Gunn tried to find a formula in order to achieve salient adverts and not “throwing darts—relying on inspiration and luck”. So he spent one year studying and analyzing what, in his view, were the best TV adverts in order to look for elemental patterns. He finally found that virtually all good adverts had what he called “master formats”. He elaborated this list of twelve types of ads so as to help consumers to defend themselves against the manipulation of advertising. He stated that “the 12 formats serve equally well as a weapon of defense for the consumer under assault from endless advertising messages. It’s like learning how a magic trick works: once the secret’s revealed, the trick loses all its power”. He classifies ads in terms of their relationship with manipulation:

1. The “demo”: visual demonstration of the product capabilities.
2. The “show the need or problem”, first you make it clear that something’s not up to snuff in the consumer’s life and then you introduce the remedy.
3. You present a symbol, analogy or exaggerated graphic to present the problem.
4. he comparison, your product is superior to those of your competitors.
5. The exemplary story, weave a narrative which helps illustrate the product’s benefits.
6. The benefit causes story, you conceive the ad back to front by imagining a trail of events that might be caused by the product’s benefit.
7. Testimonial or A tells B
8. The ongoing characters and celebrities.
9. The symbol, analogy or exaggerated graphic demonstrating benefit of the product.
10. The associated user imagery, the advertiser showcases the type of people it hopes you’ll associate with the product: good-looking, funny, beauty people.
11. The unique personality property, This ad highlight something indigenous to the product that will make it stand out (the country for example).
12. The parody of borrowed format.

In this section, I have provided insights on issues surrounding the concept of advertising, essentially regarding its power to create unwanted necessities. Then I have pinpointed how persuasion is carried out by means of persuasion. Finally I have researched the categories in which adverts can be divided, and how one of those categorizations, the one by Gunn may shed new light on the research of manipulation in advertising taking into account that manipulation can be defined, according to Philipps (1997: 15-16), as “a deliberate and successful attempt by one person to get another person by appeals to reason to freely accept beliefs, attitudes, values, intentions, or actions”.

3. CORPUS

Accordingly, the material comprises a corpus of 11 ads that was gathered from an issue from four publications aimed at teenage girls: Teen Vogue, J-14: Mizz: and Top of the pops, all of them launched in February 2008. The 11 ads were selected on the basis of whether they were aimed at teenage girls.

My main hypothesis here is that, in spite of the fact that the main function of advertising is to inform about their products so as to persuade customers to buy them or, as Harris and Seldom (1962: 40) explain, “to spread information with a view of promoting the sales of marketable goods and services”, it is worth exploring the linguistic characteristics used as foregrounding devices in a corpus of English advertisements.

My point of departure is the analysis of each selected advert in these four publications with the aim of looking for examples, if any, of how advertising can persuade and manipulate teenagers to buy things which they might not really need. More specifically, it is my intention to adopt Gunn’s classification of ads (described above), which I would like to highlight, was implemented so as to help consumers to defend themselves against the manipulation of advertising. I will then collate the advertisements corpus with the manipulation techniques described by Gunn in order to find if any, if what he describes is so in teenager’s magazines too.

4. RESULTS

In this section I provide and analyze the results obtained when collating Gunn’s classification and the adverts corpus so as to look for any kind of manipulation techniques employed. My first findings are described in (Table 1):

Advert	Manipulation described.
Advert 1: Tampax	Emotional manipulation from admen by advertising collaboration with social campaigns.
Advert 2: H&M	Emotional manipulation through metaphors.
Advert 3: Tampax	Emotional manipulation by means of metaphor.
Advert 4: Privacy wear	Psychological manipulation by means of associated user imagery, the advertiser showcases the type of people it hopes you’ll associate with the product: good-looking, funny, beauty people and so forth.
Advert 5: Freshlook contact lenses	Persuasion by Introducing gift packages.
Advert 6: Befine skin food	Emotional persuasion by producing catchy slogans of their products to make them sound special.
Advert 7: Stridex power pads	Psychological use of exaggerated symbols to demonstrate benefit of the product.
Advert 8: Covergirl	Psychological manipulation with side effects.
Advert 9: Macy’s	
Advert 10: Vans	Psychological persuasion by using celebrities.
Advert 11: Milk	Use of manipulation for good causes.

Table 1. Manipulation techniques.

Consider the advertisement for *Tampax and Always* (Figure 1). The advert consists of an illustration showing an arid landscape which can be associated with a poor country and, as a foregrounding image, the picture of a child-girl at an old school desk. Printed besides the girl is a headline, “*There are lots of reasons kids miss school. Being a girl shouldn't be one of them*” and a subheading:

In some regions of the world, many girls have to stay home when they get their period just because they don't have protection. Which means that may fall so far behind, they drop out. You can help change that. Your purchase of Always or Tampax helps us donate \$14 million through 2008 to the United Nations Association's HERO campaign to provide feminine protection and education to girls in Southern Africa. Because every girl deserves her chance to shine. Use your period for good at www.beingirl.com/hero



Figure 1. Tampax and Always.

Tampax products use social campaigns to reach the heart of young impressionable minds. This is the first kind of manipulative adverts and, at the same time, the worst of them all, because, under the slogan “there are lots of reasons kids miss school, being a girl shouldn't be one of them” Tampax and Always let them know that by buying their products, a percentage of that money will be aimed at that social purpose. It is not the fact of participating in such a campaign which is manipulative as it can be described as a commendable purpose, but the fact that it is in magazines of this kind to get more customers. Another example of these social campaigns is seen in an advert by H&M in *TeenVogue* (Figure 2). In this advert we find a girl dressed in a shirt by the advertised brand and a headline: Fashion against aids.

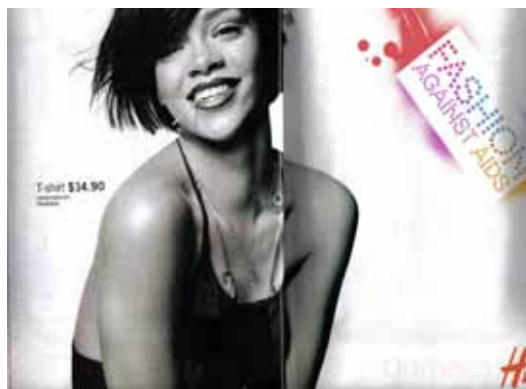


Figure 2. H&M.

In this case the campaign is for AIDS, and if you buy their clothes, a small percentage will go in favour of that campaign: 25% of the sales price of this collection goes directly to *HIV/AIDS education and prevention efforts*. Learn more at hm.com Fashion against aids.

Another example of sanitary products is figure 3, on Tampax. The illustration shows a girl's room in which some toys are surrounding a tampon as if it were a brand new toy. The slogan says: (advert text) "*There is a new star in cute-Ville. Small, smooth and now with applications in four different colours, one for each level of absorbency. Tampax Compact, too cute to bother you*".



Figure 3. Tampax.

In this case *there is a new star in cute-ville*, is a metaphor which is being used as a manipulative technique since a tampon is being identified with a cute toy -or something which a girl could wear, like a watch which would match her clothes-. In advertising language, metaphors are "an extremely frequent device" (Vestergaard and Schroder, 1985: 38). In this case, the aim of the creators of this ad seems to be to persuade girls emotionally by using the slogan *too cute to bother you*, which could be interpreted as: the period will not bother you if you have tampons in different colors. This advertisement comes from Teen-Vogue, a magazine aimed at well-off young girls.

A far more common way of arousing interest in advertising is by using associated user imagery, that is, the advertiser showcases the type of people it hopes you will associate with the product: good-looking, fun-loving, beautiful people, as mentioned before. The advertisement for "Privacy Wear" is a good example of this kind of manipulation. The advert consists of a montage of different pictures containing slim, happy and pretty girls, wearing this brand of clothes (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Privacy Wear.

As can be seen in these pictures, a prototype of young girl is established here since there is not a single overweight or unattractive girl in them, this fact could bring fatal consequences for teenagers' health as Toro, Cervera and Pérez (1988: 132) argue. After analyzing the impact of commercial advertising encouraging slimming, these researchers on psychiatry found that directly or indirectly, 22.5% of advertisements encourage weight loss. For them, Aesthetic motivations predominate over health and "advertising impact is mainly targeted at a female population in the 14 to 18 age group from upper and middle social class backgrounds living in towns over 50.000 inhabitants". Curiously, "this demographic coincidence with anorexia nervosa suggests that advertising may be thought of as a cultural environmental risk factor for this disorder".

In turn, advert 5 on Freshwear Freshlook color contact lenses (see Figure 5) provides another example of a persuasive technique, which in my view, may create in people in general –and in teenagers in particular- the artificial necessity of achieving something, a different color for their eyes. In this case, the ad creator tries to persuade consumers to buy their products by introducing gift packages or bonus packs to attract them. Get a free trial pair is the sales promotion of this ad. According to Soo Ong, Nin Ho, and Tripp, (1997), "A bonus pack is a manufacturer's sales promotion technique of giving the buyer an extra quantity of a product at the usual price (e.g. an extra 6 oz free; buy four, get one free)". In other words, the buyer feels she or he is getting two products for the price of one. In this advert, we can see the face of a woman with extraordinarily beautiful eyes and many colorful drops framing the headlines and the body of the advert, which says: *Get a free trial pair at freshlookcolorstudio.com. Now. It's easier to see yourself in a new eye color. Upload your photo. Find your favorite color. Then share your new look with your friends. Try it today at freshlookcolorstudio.com.*



Figure 5. Freshwear

Another method of manipulation is that used in Befine's advert (see Figure 6). It directly targets the gratification and self esteem of young girls by producing a catchy slogan of their products to make them feel special: *Be radiant, be fresh, be transformed...* Therefore in most of these products, consumers are exploited as they are promised something special which will transform either their skin -as in this case- or their body, weight, faces and so forth. We have observed this kind of manipulation in perfume ads, however, as Vesteaergaard and Schoder (1985: 6) explain,

One social need satisfied by perfume could be satisfied equally well by the cheapest and most efficient deodorant, or by a wash. But women still use perfume- and one brand rather than another- because

of the symbolic value of their particular brand. They define themselves, and are encouraged to define themselves, as persons through the brand of perfume they use.

This same example can be extrapolated to most products related to body care. Furthermore, Befine uses a foregrounding technique, that is, parallelism by repeating the bare imperative “be” to weaken the possible incredulity and rejection of potential consumers, all this together with a highly attractive visual impact of its images, make this kind of adverts especially dangerous for vulnerable teenagers.



Figure 6. Befine.

In turn, figure 7, *Stridex pads*, uses symbols (analogies and/or exaggerated images) demonstrating the benefits of the product and, in this way, adding value to it, which is another persuasive tool. Boxing gloves are always related to a fight, a fight against acne in this case, in other words, adding these boxing gloves provides young people with the impression of being a real fighter against their problem, not because it is a tested product but simply because of the image of the huge boxing gloves. In addition, the fact of endowing the advert with information about the chemical components provided in this product, even though no prescription is needed to achieve it, “appeals to the authority of science or the medical profession” (Vestergaard and Schroder (1985: 66) which is once again considered a manipulation technique, since this enhances the product’s credibility.



Picture 7. Stridex power pads.

Figures 8 and 9, are again examples of trying to get customers to feel identified with their main characters: gorgeous and sexy girls. In other words, ad’s creators, in these cases, are laun-

ching the subliminal message that teenagers might look like the models in these adverts if they use their product. In my view, this is a psychological manipulation – though it could be said that all kinds of manipulation are psychological in the advertising world, but in this case, advertisers appeal directly to the emotional side of teenagers whose main feature, these days, is to be in constant competition with each other, especially with regard to their physical appearance. Picture 8, for instance, entices us into having a wonderful look after using Covergirl make up as the slogan says: *three ways to shine without all that sticky! [...] gives you endless options in shine*. In turn, picture 9 offers us the possibility of having a sexy “bottom” by wearing Macy’s jeans. The identification with the girls in both adverts could become the only reason to buy these products, not taking into account other factors, such as the price, for instance.



Figure 8. Covergirl.



Figure 9. Macy's.

What is more, in the ad on Covergirl which, as mentioned before advertises lipsticks, the advertiser first makes it clear that something is not up to snuff in the consumer's life, in this case they show a problem that some other lipsticks have, which is being too sticky: *without all that sticky*, and then he introduces the remedy. However in Macy's jeans, figure 9, a metaphor is used to achieve this same effect, the artificial necessity of having those “apple bottom jeans”. As can be seen in Figure 8 and later in figure 10, some advertisers use celebrities. Rhianna, the famous singer, is the main character in figure 8 and another celebrity Anne Faith Nicholls, an artist from San Francisco, CA, is the centre of figure 10. In this case it has even provided her web site www.annefaithnicholls.com. Schudson (1986) accounts for the use of celebrities in advertising as a manipulation device, he says that the association of a product or brand with a celebrity may suggest to the consumer that by using those products he or she may be changed into a “more beautiful or more desirable human being” and consequently he/she will buy the product (conscious or unconsciously), his or her choice being a result of manipulation.

To finish with, there are some other adverts in which manipulation is used with good purposes (not forgetting this is a manipulation of consumers' choice too). Figure 11 shows a beautiful teenage girl with traces of milk on her top lip as if she has just drunk a glass. Advertisers here use a linguistic deviation “body by milk” to foreground the main message which is to choose milk over sugary drinks, together with the use of images which may create the desire of drinking milk. This is not a commercial advertisement, but what Vestergaard and Schroder classified as a non-commercial one, that is, which is part of a government health campaign supporting the

consumption of milk as opposed to sugary drinks; however my aim has been to show it as an example of what I could call “positive” manipulation.



Figure 10. Vans.



Figure 11. Milk.

5. CONCLUSION

To bring the paper to a close, I can draw a tentative conclusion. My first objective has been successfully achieved. It was to look for examples, in printed advertising, of how advertising persuasion has an influence on people’s choice in two senses: firstly making them (us) buy a specific brand or, secondly, creating artificial necessities which make us achieve things just

for the pleasure of having them. My main hypothesis here was that it was worth exploring the linguistic characteristics used as foregrounding devices in a corpus of English advertisements, my underlying premise being to discover what linguistic messages or images convey manipulative information which is picked up by teenagers creating in them the need to obtain certain products. I would like to highlight that the most manipulative advertisements are directly aimed at girls (being aware that, at first sight at least, the magazines used in order to gather the main advertising corpus are aimed at teenagers in general) rather than boys, as they tend to be better potential customers and more easily manipulated according to several authors like Kilbourne (1999). The magazines studied here are aimed solely at girls, I was not able to find a magazine aimed solely at teenage boys - which, in my view, shows that the feminine world is more likely to be persuaded. We should try to make our teenagers, especially girls, immune to advertising dangers since, as Kilbourne (1999) argues,

[...] much of advertising power comes from the belief that advertising does not affect us. The most effective kind of propaganda is that which is not recognized as propaganda. Because we think that advertising is silly and trivial, we are less on guard, less critical, than we might otherwise be.

However, it is not clear to what extent we are aware of being manipulated, mainly because it is difficult to measure the effects “of an individual ad or campaign on sales of the advertised product” (Philips, 1997: 110). In other words, to what extent has an advert on, for instance, perfume, had an influence on our choice of a specific brand of perfume? Is it due to the symbolic value of their particular brand, as these same authors state or could it be due to what this or that advert passes on to them by means of linguistic devices which make them define and identify themselves with the brand of perfume they use?

In order to look for a linguistic explanation to these questions, further analysis may be needed, that is, a matter of weighing up, taking into account all the relevant aspects of the issue regarding reality and experience in advertising and discussing all the points raised by the research. So I propose an insight into the effects of advertisements as an accurate and clear reflection of the reality, that is, focusing particularly on fantasies which could become real if a special brand of any product, let's say a perfume, is achieved. Thus a systemic functional approach to this issue seems a good starting point, since it researches ideational meanings, which shows how our experience is constructed in discourse.

Hence, this further research will be held within the research group “Efectos pragmático-cognitivos de los elementos paralingüísticos y extralingüísticos sobre la audiencia en los anuncios de televisión en lengua inglesa” (Pragmatic-Cognitive effects of the paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements on the audience on TV advertising in English language), directed by Doctor Barry Pennock from the Department of English and German Studies of the Faculty of Philology, Translation and Communication at the University of Valencia, Spain.

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