

Ads: Buying to be someone

Since the late 20th century, many sociologists have carried out research to analyze the social role of advertising. The most topical and interesting results were achieved by Leiss and Klein in “Goods as Satisfiers” and “Goods as Communicators”. In these studies, Leiss and Klein state that people in today’s consumer society define themselves by buying specific products, and that, therefore, these products become communicators of everyone’s fundamental need to belong to a social group. Consequently, advertisers create systems of identity and prestige by presenting goods as the incarnation of specific social traits. By doing so, they make people want to buy these products to demonstrate to belong to that target group.

From this point of view, advertising is a privileged form of discourse in social interaction. In fact, ads make us desire objects that could better express the image of ourselves we want to send to others. The language of this discourse is the “slogan”, which is concise and semantically dense to drive the consumers’ attention to those aspects of the product that make people choose it. However, the most interesting expedients used are images that send subliminal messages more successfully since people generally absorb them without full conscious awareness. Consequently, images have a greater influence in people’s perception of their social needs and, thus, on their desire to possess certain products.

It can be easily observed in the following ads that show standards of cars which refer to extremely diverse consumers’ targets. The Mercedes E class ad belongs to the “Lifestyles” class* which portrays an extra-ordinary life many people aspire to. The spot shows a smartly dressed man who is walking out of a building towards his expensive car. This building is the first indication of the character’s social position because of its prestigious appearance. The height of the building and

* There exist five class of advertising from semiotic point of view: “Lifestyle” dealing with special lifestyle you people to, “Slice of life” dealing with ordinary life, “Fantasy” dealing with fantastic characters or situations, “Mood or Image” which make people identify with the model of man7woman proposed, and “Testimonial” whose protagonists are loved by the most people.

its wide black windows which reflect the sunlight let us imagine the important companies or business offices within it.

In addition, the man is wearing a suit, under his long coat you can catch sight of a tie and he is holding a leather briefcase. All these details give him a distinguished appearance. Through the man's way of dressing and the features of the place where he is supposed to work, advertisers make him look like the prototype of the rich and realized businessman.

Instead, the second ad sends a very different message immediately revealed by the characters. The protagonists are three guys who hang around with their new red Ford Fiesta, listening to music in a cheerful atmosphere. Unlike the first one, this is a "Slice of life" ad, as it portrays an ordinary situation that common people could experience every day. The ad is addressed to those young people who want to be active and surrounded by friends. The choice of bright colours such as the red of the car, the blue of the sky and the yellow of the sun, remind us of youthful liveliness. In the first case, the idea linked to the Mercedes car is that of wealth, prestige and self-realization, clearly represented by the man. In the second case, the advertiser associates the Ford Fiesta with idea of dynamism and youth, best expressed by guys who enjoy themselves.

All these factors considered, through mainly visual advertising techniques marketers exploit the social implications of goods, associating them with certain lifestyles. By doing so, advertisers work on people's desire to express their identity in order to turn them into potential buyers.

References:

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