

IULIA GRAD

AN EXPLORATION OF THE EMBEDDING OF RITUAL BEHAVIOR IN ADVERTISING TEXTS

Iulia Grad

Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Email: iuliagrad@gmail.com

Abstract: This article analyzes, drawing on conceptual tools from communication philosophy and cultural anthropology, the integration of ritual behavior into advertising texts. The first part of the paper presents a general approach to the presence of ritual behaviors in promotional communication. Next, a conceptual framework is outlined, enabling a nuanced exploration of the presence of ritual in advertising texts. For this purpose, the concept of liminality, as addressed by Victor Turner, and Culinau's analysis of the concept of subjective power and its link to rites, with their integrative and compensatory functions, are primarily utilized. Subsequently, three frequently employed archetypal figures in branding, characterized by a shared trait of reticence towards social norms, are presented. The final part of the paper focuses on how the incorporation of ritualized behaviors contributes to shaping the advertising message. These behaviors, by presenting a ritual sequence easily repeated by the audience, become effective tools in conveying the significant message of the advertisement and associating the brand with profound meanings.

Key words: advertising, ritual, liminality, brand archetypes, brand storytelling, Gillette.

1. Introduction

Advertising has undergone spectacular transformations in recent decades, which has led to a reconfiguration of its place and function in contemporary society. Although its basic function remains the same, namely to make us buy products, services, or ideas, the form in which the advertising message is delivered makes it absolutely necessary to reconsider the role and place of advertising in contemporary society. This kind of approach to advertising texts has a long history and is based on the assumption that advertising is an important source of symbolic material and meaningful stories for contemporary man. In this way, advertising succeeds in taking over important parts of the place and functions that in traditional societies belonged to myth and religion. (Frunză 2014) Thus, “advertisers take over from the set of codes, rituals and symbols that they share with all members of a community and to which they all resort to interpret their own existence and, through this, to give meaning to the lived social reality.” (Côté, Daigle 1999, 157)

The way in which advertising manages to transform the resorts of symbolic thought into instruments of promotional communication is an extremely complex theme, which requires investigation from multiple standpoints, ranging from critical perspectives, which are strongly influenced by the classical approaches such as those proposed by authors Roland Barthes (1972) or Jean Baudrillard (1981), to readings that offer a rather neutral tone and constative approach (Lipovetsky 2007, Kornberger 2010, Frunză 2014).

2. Ritual and consumption in advertising

The integration of a ritual dimension into the narrative structure of advertising texts, when appropriate, is a factor that can significantly enhance the effectiveness of advertisements (Rook 1984). Ritual, defined as “the performance, in a more or less invariable way, of sequences of formal acts or discourses, whose coding does not belong entirely to the performers” (Coman 2003, 55) can be a key part of the designing of an effective advertising message. Mihai Coman stresses the idea that, unlike myth, ritual is broader and encompasses distinct categories. He highlights two levels of the relationship between media and ritual: the dissemination of rituals and the creation of “manifestations with strong ritual characteristics” (Coman 2003, 54).

It is also worth mentioning the practical perspective, which seeks to understand the technical aspects of the way advertising becomes more

effective by using these contents and narrative structures. Here we identify numerous endeavors to incorporate the characteristics of ritual behaviour, such as formal appearance, invariance, precoding, performance, non-instrumentality (Rappaport 1979) into advertising depictions of ritual consumer behavior.

Definitely, it is crucial to adapt to the constraints of the advertising space, which necessitates condensing the presented ritual behavior. Therefore, the presentation of the ritual behavior in the narrative structure of an advertisement must adhere to certain guidelines often formulated as tips and tricks by advertising professionals. Typically, this involves emphasizing the essential stages of the consumption ritual, starting with effectively communicating the trigger—conveying information about the contexts in which the product is meant to be consumed—and subsequently showcasing the consumption behavior, including each step of the ritual, in a manner that is easily replicable. The main stake of this process is in fact the integration of the product into the ritual behavior and the attributing of the meaning of the rituals in accordance with the brand. (McNally 2015) This consistency between the significance of the ritual, the values associated with the brand and the narrative structure of the advertisement is facilitated by achieving specific milestones in the process: the advertising story must present the context and the pre-existing behaviors, it must present the ritual and its stages, it must be emblematic and have a consistent symbolic dimension, it must stress the relevance of the ritual gesture and it must be simple and shareable (Howard 2011).

The integration of the ritual dimension into the consumption experience is a factor that contributes to a positive attitude towards the product. After analyzing four experiments, Vohs and colleagues conclude that the ritual behavior enhances consumption satisfaction and increases product enjoyment. An important aspect that the authors emphasize is the role of the consumer's personal involvement in the ritual. (Vohs et al. 2013).

This key element for understanding the effect that ritual behavior has on consumer attitudes is reflected, at the level of the design of advertising texts, in the cardinal importance that the “authenticity” of stories plays. The imperative of authenticity, which plays a defining role in brand storytelling (Grad 2021), becomes even more evident when we consider the effectiveness of integrated ritual behaviors in advertising narratives that successfully convey a personal and authentic tone. Given that they “valorize products by integrating them into rites and rituals that 'consecrate' the relationship between people and things and between people” (Côté, Daigle 1999, 157), the advertising texts manage to “build reference systems that allow them to establish a social communication, to produce meaning.” (Côté, Daigle 1999, 157)

3. Rituals and liminality

The ritualization of consumption in advertising texts is not restricted to straightforward, unambiguous representations that simply present the consumption of the product, service or brand in a ceremonial form. We find a much more subtle and refined dimension of ritualization in advertising communication, which is well suited to the complex and versatile forms that contemporary advertising texts take. To delve deeper into the presence of ritualization in advertising texts, we employ anthropological concepts that enhance our comprehension of the significance of ritual behavior. These concepts, in my view, remain applicable even when we consider the disenchanting and secularized manifestations of ritual, which are inherent to consumer society and are also conveyed through advertising texts. The essential connection between ritualistic behavior and the state of liminality is relevant at this point in our analysis. The connection is evident in both the simplistic portrayal of rituals in advertising stories, depicting everyday moments of transition like the shift from private to public self or from work to leisure, among others, and in the portrayal of more significant transitions that signify changes in social status (such as adolescence, adulthood, marriage, and death).

Even in the most simple forms of ritual behavior represented in advertisements, one can identify the three essential phases of ritual: detachment from the original group or status, the liminal stage, and the acceptance and embracing of the new status (Solomon 2009, 532).

Victor Turner, the author who consecrated the indissoluble connection between ritual and liminality, defines ritual as “the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts” in his analysis of the concept of social drama. (Turner 1987, 75) As Mihai Coman shows (Coman 2008) although the concept of liminality was introduced in anthropological research on non-modern cultures, it has been extrapolated, both by Turner and other authors, to contemporary culture. Turner integrated it into a general theory of ritual, based on the idea of the essential relation between ritual and social change, the ritual as “a transformative performance revealing major classifications, categories and contradictions of cultural process” (Turner 1987, 75) containing the key to a deeper understanding of specific cultural processes. “Through the social drama we are enabled to observe the crucial principles of the social structure in their operation, and their relative dominance at successive points in time.” (Turner 1987, 74)

These “disharmonic social processes” have four main stages: the breach in the social norms governing the social relations, the crisis, when the breach increases, the “redressive action”, denoting the attempts to mediate and to overcome the conflict, and the reintegration of the distur-

bing element into the social group or the acknowledgement and legitimization of an irreparable breach (Turner 1987). Thus the ritual is “a statement against indeterminacy”, “an attempt to bring a part of life firmly and definitively under the control of the social order” (Turner 1987, 75).

In a parallel framework, which similarly revolves around the interplay between structure and anti-structure, the concept of ritual is evident in Culianu's study (2005). In his attempt to identify the common elements between religion and power and to understand how religious techniques can be used in order to maintain and increase power, Ioan Petru Culianu differentiates between two meanings of power: an objective one, which is always determined by another term, such as physical, political, military, etc., and a subjective one, which refers to the personal experience of each individual. Culianu defines subjective power as: “a change of inner state undergone by the individual or the collectivity through an investment of a variable nature”. (Culianu 2005) The situations he describes as being instances in which this type of power manifests itself have as a common element the fact that the individual witnesses the manifestation of a force that he perceives as being stronger than the force with which society acts on him, through the rules and laws that render it possible, and that the individual has a feeling of “momentary freedom from these rigid norms” (Culianu 2005).

Thus, the subjective power has an asocial or even antisocial core, and it is inversely related to the objective power, Culianu describing “a dialectic of power that annihilates itself in the transition from the subjective to the objective and reaffirms itself in the annihilation of laws through the work of the individual.” (Culianu 2005, 207) The two functions of rituals intervene in this tension: the integrative function, which allows the individual to be integrated into the social group and to feel that he or she is part of it, and the compensatory function of ritual, which provides the space for “the normed breaking of the norms” (Culianu 2005), a ritualized violation of the norms that allows the individual to be liberated from the tension caused by the social constraints.

In this case too, the ritual is inextricably linked to the state of liminality that we find at Turner and is depicted as an instrument that responds to the danger of social indeterminacy. The manifestation of the subjective power, which Culianu identifies in its extreme form in the “specialists of power” who truly embody the subjective power, becomes, through ritualization, the norm and can be integrated into the social fabric (Culianu 2005, 194).

4. Rituals and archetypal figures in advertising

This key feature of rituals is also relevant to the way advertising texts describe ritual behaviors. The use of certain archetypal figures and

narrative structures which also have at their very core the same tension between the constraining society and the absolutely free individual is illustrative in this respect. We are referring to the well-known archetypal figures used in branding: the explorer, the trickster and the outlaw. In each of these figures we find that tension, a deep dissatisfaction with what society is and has to offer and a desire to break free from the social norms and to acquire or restore a state of grace that has been corrupted by the way society has evolved. The attitude is essentially similar in the case of the three archetypal figures, the differences being in degree and tone.

The explorer is more restrained and seeks to experience and discover himself on his journeys and expeditions. "Finding their identity outside the current social structure, such Outlaws are faithful to deeper, truer values than the prevailing ones." (Mark, Pearson 2001, 132) The outlaw's reaction to social norms is significantly more powerful and aggressive than that of the explorer. Mark and Pearson underline a link between this archetypal figure and Thanatos. Just like the "specialists of power" described by Cuiianu, the outlaw must "die" as a legitimate member of society by transgressing all the norms only to be reborn beyond them.

It is precisely this state of liminality that is constitutive of this archetypal figure that is also used in advertising creations. The periods of major transition, such as adolescence or middle age, are associated with the symbolic desire to "die" in order to "be reborn" with a new identity. So the image of death is appealing. But it is a symbolic, metaphorical death that should be channeled into "metamorphosis" and not "annihilation". (Mark, Pearson 2001, 132) Through its stories, advertising creates products that embody this need, and the ritual dimension is an important part of the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the process.

The third archetypal figure, the trickster, presents the same tense relationship with social norms. The trickster's particular characteristics are primarily derived from his being a mediating figure. But this does not mean that he mediates conflicts, on the contrary, he often generates them, because he is always on the border, does not belong to any world and therefore he is not bound by any norms. Claude Levi Strauss's analysis (Levi Strauss 1978) of the trickster underlines precisely this nature of a mediator that is constantly in between two worlds. The animals that typically represent this archetypal figure are the raven or the coyote, which by their carrion-eating behaviour are situated between herbivores and predators, i.e. they mediate between life and death. The trickster is a very complex and contradictory figure. "It breaks taboos, stretches the mind and challenges the limits of belief. The Trickster represents the oppositions and contradictions of life; how we deceive ourselves that we are rational when we are not." (Cooper, Patterson 2001, 26) Out of the three archetypal figures mentioned, the trickster is the most insidious in undermining the culture to which he belongs and in attacking its norms. The ironic spirit and the fact that he does not abide to the rules confers

him a paradoxical power, the power of the jester who can tell the truth to the king without losing his head, a power that undermines the official discourse and at the same time can instigate the change. “The destructive/creative work of the trickster may serve different functions, such as raising awareness, creating optimal conditions for a cultural paradigm shift or introducing a fundamental metanarrative in the life of a community.” (Grădinaru 2012, 86) In branding, the trickster theory uses this ambiguous nature in the process of creating a special significance of the product or brand. “This type of advertising is both childish and mature, simple and complex, humorous and serious, exaggerated and practical.” (Cooper, Patterson 2001, 12)

The fascinating subjective power of these archetypal figures is used effectively within the advertising narratives. The power to question the norms and to withstand the constraints inherent to life in society are elements that, once integrated into the structure of the advertising story, contribute, along with other factors, of course, to the effectiveness of the advertisement's message. In these types of advertising narrative structures, we often find ritualized behaviors, which are decisive in creating the meaning of the story. In such cases, the ritual, if it complies with the requirements of the advertising textual framework, is able to deliver a ritualistic sequence that allows the audience to access a form of subjective power indirectly, by proxy. Although it is perhaps too much to invoke the concept of subjective power in this context, I consider that this very diluted form of power can still, through contagion, convey this significance to the brand.

There are countless examples of advertisements that illustrate this subtle integration of ritual into advertising stories that effectively contribute to building the meanings we commonly associate with serious stories that convey life lessons and teachings. There are several reasons why I think the example I will focus on below, a Gillette ad, is appropriate. First of all because the products of this brand are by default relevant to a discussion about ritual. The first shave marks a key moment in a young man's development and is often a key element in the coming-of-age ritual. Secondly, this is a brand that has adapted very well to the trend that defines contemporary advertising, which is the integration of messages with a social and political stake in advertising texts (Tinic 1992).

The Gillette brand has been undergoing a major transformation of its advertising strategy, culminating in 2019 with the launch of the advertising campaign entitled *The best a man can be*. This campaign title is the result of a game of distancing itself from the previous tagline, *The best a man can get*, through the association with a strong message that draws attention to the harmful impact that sexism, aggression, sexual harassment and, in general, behaviors that fall under the label of toxic masculinity have on the next generation of men in particular. In addition, Gillette is committing to donate \$1 million per year over three years to US

organizations involved in educating and supporting men to become positive role models for future generations (Gillette, 2019) It is also worth mentioning the strong controversy that has been stirred up around this campaign, with the main criticism being that the campaign “emasculates men” by encouraging an assault on masculinity (Topping, Lyons, Weaver 2019).

Also in 2019, the Gillette ad “First Shave, the story of Samson” #MyBestSelf was launched. This ad also fits into this paradigm shift in Gillette's branding strategy as it conveys a strong inclusive message. The commercial shows Samson, a transgender teenager, being helped by his father to shave for the first time. This moment is presented in a genuine way, leaving the viewer with the impression of witnessing a very personal moment between a father and his son. Of course, the fact that the two characters are real is a decisive contributor to the story's aura of authenticity. The presentation of the moment of the first shaving is alternated with moments in which the characters speak directly to the camera about the significance and importance of the moment.

At one point, Samson confesses “I'm at the point in my manhood where I'm actually happy. It's not just myself transitioning, it's everyone around me transitioning.” The ad captures this pivotal transformational moment by presenting a rite of passage in the form of the first shave. The shave is the focal point of the ad, with the father's instructions to his son, this gesture signals a moment of profound transformation, not only for Samson, but also for the people around him. The meaning of this transition is encapsulated in the ritual that the two perform. Even though the Gillette product itself is not very present in the advertisement, it plays an essential part in the story, being a ritual object that renders this crucial transition possible.

5. Conclusion

This type of advertisements illustrates how ritual behaviors can be integrated into the narrative structure of a commercial in more subtle ways than simply ritualizing the consumption. By doing so, the advertisement transforms the brand into a pivotal element within the consumer's story, going beyond merely recounting the story of the product or brand. This kind of 'minimal presence' (Lipovetsky 1996) of the brand is essential for creating authentic advertising stories that successfully deliver more than a marketing message. This type of storytelling allows advertising to convey a powerful social message, which even with its moral ambiguity and the controversies it creates, could contribute to the social dialogue about significant issues that shape society at certain moments.

In this context, advertising has emerged as a significant medium for transmitting social and cultural ideas, engaging in discussions about serious matters that were once foreign to the traditional advertising landscape. Of interest here is the way in which the incorporation of ritualistic behaviors contributes to shaping the message of advertising and how these behaviors, by presenting a ritual sequence that can be easily repeated by the audience, become effective tools both in conveying the significant message of the advertisement and associating the brand with those profound meanings.

References:

- Barthes, Roland. 1997. *Mitologii*. București: Institutul European.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 2008. *Societatea de consum*. București: Comunicare.ro.
- Coman, Mihai. 2003. *Mass media, mit și ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*. Iași, Polirom.
- Coman, Mihai. 2008. "Liminality in Media Studies: From Everyday Life to Media Events". In *Victor Turner and contemporary cultural performance*. Edited by Graham St John, 94-109. Berghahn Books.
- Cooper, Peter; Patterson, Simon. 2000. *The Trickster: A Theory of Modern Branding and Advertising*. ESOMAR Athens.
- Cooper, Peter; Patterson, Simon. 2001. „The Trickster: myth and magic in great ads”. *Admap.World Advertising Research Center*. April issue: 29-32.
- Côté, Luc, Daigle, Jean-Guy. 1999. *Publicité de masse et masse publicitaire: le marché québécois des années 1920 aux années 1960*. Les Presses de L'Université d'Ottawa
- Culianu, Ioan Petru. 2005. „Religia și creșterea puterii”. In *Religie și putere*. Edited by Ioan Petru Culianu, Gianpaolo Romanato, Mario G. Lombardo. București: Polirom.
- Frunză, Sandu. 2014. *Advertising constructs reality. Religion and advertising in the consumer society*. București: Tritonic.
- Grădinaru, Ioan-Alexandru. 2012. “The Ways of the Trickster. Meaning, Discourse and Cultural Blasphemy”. *Argumentum: Journal the Seminar of Discursive Logic, Argumentation Theory & Rhetoric* Vol 10 No 2: 85-96.
- Grad, Iulia. 2021. “Advertising and meaningful stories”. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* Vol.20 No 59: 95-107.
- Howard, Jon. 2011. “Ritualizing your brand: how establishing meaningful, ownable behaviour can create lasting loyalty and value”. *Living Brands*. Available at <https://jonhoward.typepad.com/livingbrands/>
- Kornberger, Martin. 2010. *Brand Society. How Brands Transform Management and Lifestyle*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1978. *Antropologia structurală*. București: Ed. Politică.

- Lipovetsky, Gilles. 1996. *Amurgul datoriei. Etica nedureroasă a noilor timpuri democratice*. Bucuresti, Babel.
- Mark, Margaret; Pearson, Carol S. 2001. *The hero and the outlaw. Building extraordinary brands through the power of archetypes*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McNally, Seán. 2015. "Understanding and Using Consumer Rituals in Marketing". *Eris Strategy*. 6 July. Available at: www.erisstrategy.com.au
- Rappaport, Roy. 1979. *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Rook, Dennis W. 1984. "Ritual Behavior and Consumer Symbolism". *NA - Advances in Consumer Research*. Edited by Thomas C. Kinnear, Provo. UT: Association for Consumer Research. Vol 11: 279-284.
- Solomon, Michael R. 2019. *Consumer Behaviour: Buying, Having and Being*. Pearson.
- Tinic, Serra. 1997. "United Colors and United Meanings. Benetton and the Commodification of Social Issues". *Journal of Communication* Vol. 47 No. 3: 3-25.
- Topping, Alexandra, Lyons, Kate and Weaver, Matthew. 2019. "Gillette #MeToo razors ad on 'toxic masculinity' gets praise – and abuse". *The Guardian*. 15 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/15/gillette-metoo-ad-on-toxic-masculinity-cuts-deep-with-mens-rights-activists>
- Turner, Victor. 1987. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Vohs, J., Y. Wang, F. Gino, and M. I. Norton. 2013. "Rituals Enhance Consumption." *Psychological Science* Vol. 24 No. 9: 1714-1721.
- Gillette. 2019. *Our statement*. <https://gillette.com/en-us/our-committment>.
- Gillette commercial „First Shave, the story of Samson. #MyBestSelf”. 23 May 2019. Available at: <https://fb.watch/lwdaMg5uD0/>