

# CONTROVERSIAL THEMES IN ADVERTISEMENTS: ON MANIPULATING THE EMOTIONS OF AUDIENCES AND EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SOCIAL ‘TABOO’

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## ABSTRACT:

In the modern world, manipulation is being experienced practically every day. Manipulation is an important element of the strategy of communication and advertising in business. A large selection of competitive products and advertising noise make it increasingly difficult for a product to break through to customer awareness. On the one hand, advertising creates consumer attitudes and, on the other hand, the clutter of advertising and promotional announcements forces companies to search for more and more sophisticated ways to get to the customers and attract their attention. Advertisers reach for controversial themes, shocking with carefully selected images. Advertising starts to involve themes that used to be considered social taboos or at least they were the embarrassing ones, intimate or not-discussed openly in many cultures. Advertising functions as a mirror that reflects reality and, at the same time, it can shape the reality. Contemporary advertisements exhibit neutralisation of violence, pornography, attacking religious, and/or social values, often even forming the canon of a given culture. The article addresses the issue of manipulation in advertising. The author points out the phenomenon of manipulation in advertising, giving examples of controversial themes in various commercials and discussing their implications in extending social taboos' boundaries.

## KEY WORDS:

advertising, manipulation, social taboo, consumer, eroticism in advertisements, controversial advertising

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## Introduction

Manipulation is as old as mankind; however, ‘cunning’ was the word that had been used previously. It was a trait necessary all people needed to follow in order to win and to survive. It did not matter what they



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did and who they were, they were always manipulators and they were always subject to the process of manipulation. Manipulation could be already read about in Plato's *Republic*; he actually dictated to tell people that, if they wanted and left the territory, power was to be taken away from them. The aim of such manipulation was to prevent the migration of people and increase their 'attachment' to a specific city or area.<sup>1</sup>

The term "manipulation" is frequently used nowadays, both in everyday life interactions and in different kinds of scholarly publications. The meaning of this term seems to be generally known, often considered to be quite obvious. However, the proliferation of its definitions indicates that determining what manipulation really is has become a problem.

The broad definition of manipulation claims that "Manipulation is (...) an insidious use of some circumstances, bending the reality, misrepresenting facts to direct someone without his knowledge, to influence other people's business, behaviour, moods, for personal gain."<sup>2</sup> P. Honey describes manipulation as "making unfair changes to achieve one's own objective. Forcing people to do something against their interests."<sup>3</sup> A similar opinion is expressed by A. Podgórecki who explains that "manipulation takes place where, according to the manipulator, there would be a discrepancy between the adopted and the accepted pattern of behaviour of the doer and the pattern of behaviour suggested" by the manipulator. The suggested patterns of behaviour restrict the recipients' rational choice and action.<sup>4</sup> J. Puzynina defines manipulation as a usually hidden, often very finesse, sophisticated form of coercion. He notes that we tend to notice its existence very late, we are sometimes even not aware of the matter.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that we are dealing with manipulation may be indicated by attempts to induce emotional reactions that are not justified in the actual situation; the manipulator wants to arouse the emotions against the real interests of the recipient of the influence. P. G. Zimbardo and M. R. Leippe show that the influence is based on cognitive and emotional mechanisms. Influencing depends on the type of interactive systems. The impact shall be carried out via several different systems of interactions – interpersonal, persuasive (when one person affects audience in direct communication) and by the means of mass communication (indirect communication).<sup>6</sup>

According to A. Lepa, there are two basic characteristics of manipulation which determine its effectiveness – each manipulation is carefully planned and hidden. The author defines manipulation as a deliberate and secretive operation by which a false picture of the reality is imposed on an individual or a group of people.<sup>7</sup> Manipulation is also characterised by the phenomenon consisting in the fact that it sometimes displaces the common sense and the critical attitude of the person to whom it is addressed. On the other hand, a manipulator directs the situation in such a way that the doer has the impression that the combination of objective circumstances requires such behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

Manipulation is also becoming an increasingly important element of the communication strategy and advertising in business. The general "McDonaldization" of life,<sup>9</sup> consumer lifestyle that predominates in highly developed countries, an increasing number of places where you can buy goods (G. Ritzer called these places "temples of consumption"),<sup>10</sup> a large selection of competitive products make it increasingly difficult for a product to break through to raise customers' awareness and stir their interest and emotions. On the one hand, advertising creates consumer attitudes and, on the other hand, the clutter of advertising and promotional announcements forces companies to search for more and more sophisticated ways to get to customers. The themes used in advertising are becoming more and more ethically questionable. Fairness of advertising

is already not a problem of a single organisation, but more often a social problem. "Ethical issues related to advertising are caused by the fact that its effectiveness is related to the manipulation of recipients' instincts and emotions; the recipients should not be aware of the fact that they are only offered symbols, their desires, and not fulfilling them."<sup>11</sup>

Juggling the emotions of a recipient is often done in a shocking and provocative way, breaking codes of ethics and good manners. This type of a message bears the hallmarks of manipulation. The saying "the end justifies the means" is highly relevant to some advertisements. What is more, many advertisements do not show the truth or even hide certain facts, e.g. about the dangers of a given formulation, and that is the kind of manipulation the aim of which is to sell at any price.

# Advertising and Manipulation

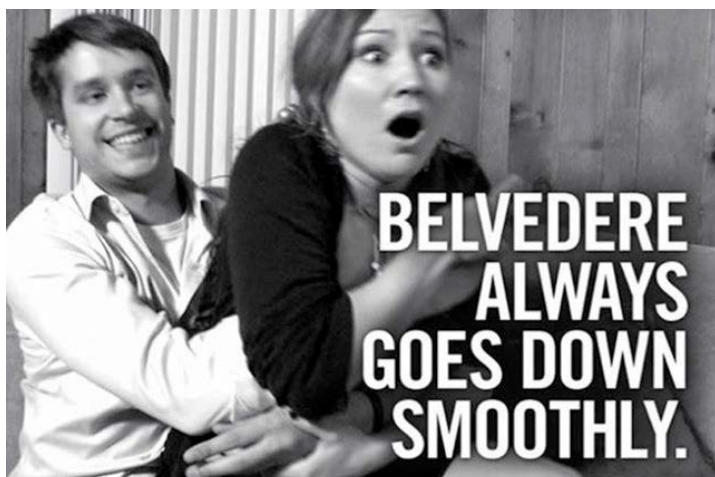
Advertising is the best known and most common form of promotional influence of business enterprises through which companies inform customers about their offer and encourage them to choose their offers over a number of competitive offers. Advertising is a paid form of communication between the company and the environment.<sup>12</sup>

Looking at modern advertising, one can actually wonder if indeed all advertisements are to inform about the offer and encourage purchase. More and more advertising messages result in controversial reflections and some of them have little in common with information and encouraging people to buy. The authors of publication titled *Social Communication in Advertising – with subtitle Consumption in the Mediated Marketplace* – state that advertisements, next to utility contents, carry a set of symbolic meanings.<sup>13</sup> Advertisements are going away from pure argumentation to enclosing contexts in socio-cultural statements. J. Turow shows that media agencies and marketers manipulate our behaviour, influencing, inter alia, our identity and shopping choices through advertising messages.<sup>14</sup> In turn, A. Ries and L. Ries proved, over 10 years ago, that advertising was increasingly becoming "art for art's sake", designed to win competitions for creative advertising, without necessarily resulting in greater sales.<sup>15</sup> A few years afterward, S. Engeseth published a book in which, referring to the theses of A. Ries and L. Ries, he referred to the paramount role of Public Relations (PR) in relation to advertising; the author argued that it was advertising which ruled the modern world of commerce and profit. PR was, in his opinion, "too slow for today's business world", being governed by the rule: "Here today, gone tomorrow". Advertising has, however, also entered an expansive sphere of the entertainment industry. "Advertising has become part of entertainment industry. Consumers are getting more sophisticated. [...] Today, half the value of advertising is getting smart consumers to spread the word, extending the reach of advertising into niche groups."<sup>16</sup>

In the case of some companies, advertising is a manifesto related to the worldview of the companies – views on the contemporary social and religious issues or differences between generations (such as Benetton's advertisements). Being provocative, ads are sometimes thought-provoking and sometimes cause outrage resulting in protests of various social groups. For example, in the United States, outrage on the Internet was caused by an advertisement for the Polish vodka, Belveder. The advertisement was available on the Internet only for an hour, but in that time the brand lost its good name and thousands of fans. The commercial showed a man grabbing a woman's breast from behind and an inscription reading: "Belvedere always goes down smoothly". The brand owners were held to account for the poster which was hailed the worst advertising in recent years.

1 KIZIŃCZUK, S.: *Manipulacja, perswazja czy magia?* [online]. [2016-01-03]. Available at: <<http://www.slideshare.net/ebooks/darmowy-ebook-manipulacja-perswazja-czy-magia>>.  
2 KOPALINSKI, W.: *Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych z almanachem*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Rytm, 2007, p. 686.  
3 HONEY, P.: *Jak radzić sobie lepiej z ludźmi*. Warszawa : PETIT, 1997, p. 54.  
4 PODGÓRECKI, A.: *Zasady socjotechniki*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Wiedza Powszechna, 1966, p. 68.  
5 PUZYNIŃA, J.: *Język wartości*. Warszawa : PWN, 1992, p. 203.  
6 ZIMBARDO, P. G., LEIPPE, M. R.: *Psychologia zmiany postaw i wpływu społecznego*. Poznań : Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, 2004, p. 20.  
7 LEPA, A.: *Świat manipulacji*. Częstochowa : Biblioteka 'Niedzieli', 1997, p. 23.  
8 GRZYWA, A.: *Manipulacja. Mechanizmy manipulacji*. Kraśnik : Mad-Graf, 1997, p. 10.  
9 RITZER, G.: *McDonaldyzacja społeczeństwa. Wydanie na nowy wie*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Literacki Muza SA, 2009, p. 89.  
10 RITZER, G.: *Magiczny świat konsumpcji*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Literacki Muza SA, 2009, p. 26.

11 DIETL, J., GASPARI, W.: *Etyka biznesu*. Warszawa : PWN, 2000, p. 79.  
12 SZYMONIUK, B.: *Komunikacja marketingowa*. Warszawa : PWE, 2006, p. 63.  
13 LEISS, W. et al.: *Social Communication in Advertising: Consumption in the Mediated Marketplace*. London : Publisher Routledge, 2005, p. 696.  
14 TUROW, J.: *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry Is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth*. New Haven : Publisher Yale University Press, 2013, p. 256.  
15 RIES, A., RIES, L.: *Fall of Advertising and Rise of PR*. New York : Harper Business, 2004, p. 38.  
16 ENGESETH, S.: *The Fall of PR and the Rise of Advertising*. Stefan Engeseth Publishing, 2006-2009. [online]. [2016-02-21]. Available at: <[http://www.detectivemarketing.com/uploads/FallofPR\\_book.pdf](http://www.detectivemarketing.com/uploads/FallofPR_book.pdf)>.



Picture 1: Advertising Belvedere in USA

Source: *Reklamy z podtekstami seksualnymi oburzają Amerykanów. Jak reagują na nie policy?* [online]. [2016-02-20]. Available at: <http://natemat.pl/7895,reklamy-z-podtekstami-seksualnymi-oburzaja-amerykanow-jak-reaguja-na-nie-polacy>.

In Poland, in 2015, a scandal was caused by the ‘Żytnia’ vodka posting an advertisement on Facebook. The company published, on its official profile, an advertisement showing a man fatally wounded by the police during one of the martial law demonstrations in 1982. The inscription in the picture read: “The Hangover? Screenplay written by Żytnia”. A wave of negative comments forced the company to apologize and remove the advertisement. In Singapore, a wave of protests was triggered by giant billboards showing the Abercrombie & Fitch brand with a man with a muscular figure in varying degrees of undress.

The ultimate goal is sales but increasing influence also extends into the field of developing consumer lifestyle. Advertising has ceased to be merely a promotional message a long time ago; it has become something through which we, looking for our own identity, unconsciously seek answers to the questions such as “How to live?” “What do we need to own?” “What to eat?” “What to wear?” “What places to visit?”, all in order to be socially accepted. Such a control over our social behaviour has been held outside of our consciousness. Podgórecki, as quoted above, summarises manipulation as follows: “Generally – manipulation is any impact on the doer in which he mistakenly thinks to be deciding, not aware that he is a means in the hands of the real performer.”<sup>17</sup> We are dealing with such an impact in the case of advertising. Consumers think that they make a rational choice of products but, in fact, their choices are controlled by companies, inter alia, through advertising.

## Advertising – The Fight for Customers’ Attention

The fight for the attention of the recipients has become one of the reasons for changes in advertising. The word ‘fight’ is not coincidental here, as we are dealing with war between producers, the stakes of which are customer’s attention and wallet, and advertising is the ultimate weapon. A huge number of ads that we can see in various media let us enter the world of beautiful, fit, healthy, tanned, smiling people, happy because they own the advertised product. O. Toscani, criticising contemporary advertising, calls such a way of recognising the world in advertising “a falsified and mesmerising model of happiness”. Toscani believes that advertising affects sensitive points of human nature – i.e. the need for happiness, acceptance, being in the limelight, beauty, success – and shows the world in which buying a product meets those needs.<sup>18</sup> The issue here, however, is that the advertised world is no longer ‘attractive’, especially for young people. Its boring, clichéd messages lose their

strength and are no longer able to attract attention. Advertisers, therefore, try to come up with something that will surprise the audience. They reach for controversial themes, shocking with images. Advertising is considered to be shocking when it uses themes considered risky, arousing mixed feelings. The themes mentioned in this type of advertising cover an increasingly broader range of topics – from eroticism, pornography, abomination, violence and even death.

As we have mentioned above, advertising starts to use themes that used to be considered social taboos or at least they were the embarrassing ones, intimate or not-discussed openly in many cultures. Taboo, in the broad sense, is a fundamental cultural prohibition the violation of which often causes a violent reaction from people living in the given culture. In the narrower sense, a taboo can relate to matters of actions not spoken about publicly. Such a taboo is inculcated in the process of socialisation and is a kind of self-censorship. For example, such taboos in many cultures include: killing, incest, violence against women, paedophilia.

Nowadays, the term “taboo”, in the scholarly discourse, is used to describe a wide range of activities. A taboo applies to almost everything that is not publicly discussed – harassment at work, extra-marital relationships, personal hygiene, some illnesses, death, even earnings. On the other hand, it is fashionable to discuss sensitive or embarrassing topics in the media and public debates – from details of sexual behaviour through harassment to mental illnesses. Violation of a taboo can be considered crossing the boundaries of good taste or decency, which may cause feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and indignation. Such boundaries of good taste are more and more frequently crossed by advertising.

The Advertising Council of Poland received 2,488 complaints about advertising messages in 2014, while there were, by comparison, only 1,429 in 2010. Most of them involved online advertising. The Council conducted a total of 216 proceedings in 2014. The greatest number of complaints – as many as 1,625 – concerned advertisements in the clothing sector, mainly as a result of online advertising for the children’s Ballerina collection. Customers claimed that the company had used images of the children shown in a sexualised manner. This advertisement was declared as not compliant with the Code of Ethics in Advertising.<sup>19</sup>

In the UK, also in 2014, a total of 37,073 complaints were received by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), 19 % more than in 2013 (31,136 in total). A report prepared by the ASA and the Committee of Advertising Practice shows that most complaints in 2014 concerned online advertising – 13,477 complaints were regarding 10,202 different online advertisements. This was 35 % more than in 2013. In 2010, the ASA received more than 25,000 complaints regarding 13,074 different advertisements.<sup>20</sup>

The canon of ads breaking taboos already includes the images of United Colors of Benetton. Oliviero Toscani, who has worked as the creator of advertising for Benetton for many years, used controversial themes already in the 1980s and continued in his work for Benetton until the end of the 1990s. He was not afraid to reach for controversial themes – religion (a priest kissing a nun), violence, racism, disability, AIDS – which often aroused fear, disgust or outrage. Nowadays, more and more companies use shocking advertising, reaching for more and more sensitive topics, sometimes extremely sensitive.

Examples of controversial advertisements can be demonstrated by such brands as Sisley, in which young women were shown acting in a manner reminiscent of taking cocaine; the German social advertisement against AIDS showed a girl having sex with a man looking either like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin or Saddam Hussein; Polish Play advertisements, showing a hand with fingers cut off. The American Apparel brand is also famous for provocation and intransigence; it has been using half-naked photographs, outrageous poses and porno-chic scenes for many years – however, in 2015 the brand went bankrupt. Even church advertising uses controversial themes. Advertisements for the Anglican Church in Britain, aimed at encouraging young people to attend services more frequently, showed an image of Jesus bleeding on the cross and the slogan: “Piercing 15 – Jesus did it 2000 years ago”.

<sup>19</sup> *Reklamuję etycznie*. [online]. [2016-02-21]. Available at: <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/wiekszosc-skarg-na-reklamy-dotyczy-stereotypow-plci-ballerina-najbardziej-oprotestowana>.

<sup>20</sup> *Wiecej skarg na reklamy internetowe niż telewizyjne w Wielkiej Brytanii*. [online]. [2016-02-21]. Available at: <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/wiecej-skarg-na-reklamy-internetowe-niz-telewizyjne-w-wielkiej-brytanii>; *Our History*. [online]. [2016-02-22]. Available at: <https://www.asa.org.uk/About-ASA/Our-history.aspx>.

<sup>17</sup> PODGÓRECKI, A.: *Zasady socjotechniki*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Wiedza Powszechna, 1966, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> TOSCANI, O.: *Reklama – uśmiecnięte ścierwo*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo DELTA, 1997, p. 15.

# The Impact Model of Advertising

The most famous model, referring to the construction of advertising messages, is the AIDA model, created as early as in 1925 by E. K. Strong. The abbreviation is an acronym derived from the names: Attention – attract attention, Interest – become interested in a product, Desire – trigger the desire to purchase, Action – stimulate the action leading to purchase.

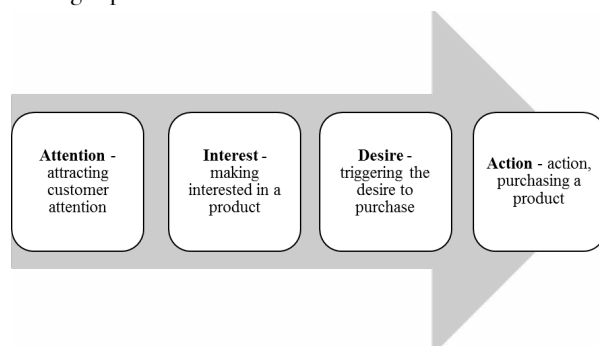


Figure 1: The AIDA impact model of advertising

Source: own processing based on various sources<sup>21</sup>

We propose that construction of a message based on shock and controversy should be based on the interaction model which we have decided to call **PEGAZ**:<sup>22</sup>

1. **P – provoking**, gaining the attention through a controversial or provocative message – image, text, music, being difficult to be ignored;
2. **E – emotions**, arousing emotions of recipients – indignation, shock, disbelief, fear, disgust, joy, curiosity, etc. Emotions which are to arouse associations with the brand and compel the recipient to think;
3. **G – a guarantee** that the message will not go unnoticed, that the recipients will forward the ad or the link to their friends, will think about it, discuss it and sometimes, maybe, the message can trigger a protest of various environments, which tends to increase the brand notoriety;
4. **A – action**, i.e. the purchase of a product and brand loyalty;
5. **Z – remembering** the message and the brand.

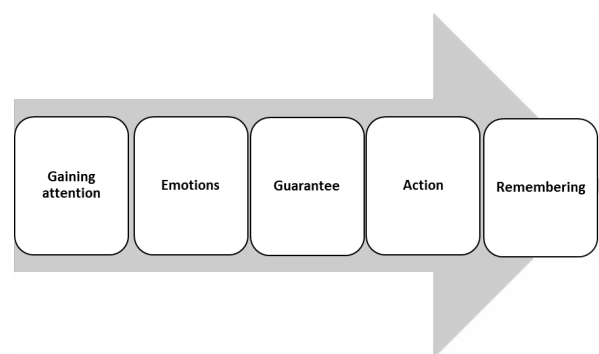


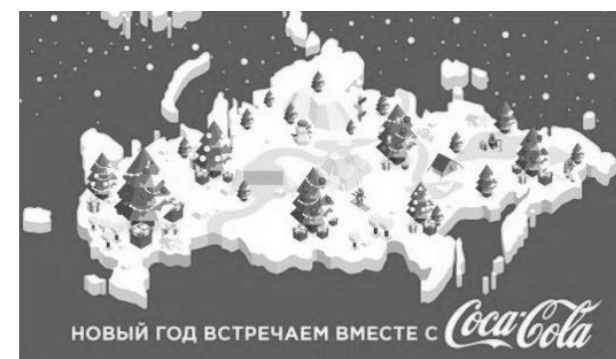
Figure 2: The impact of shocking advertising, the PEGAZ model

Source: own processing

<sup>21</sup> See: DEJNAKA, A.: *Strategia reklamy marki, produktów i usług*. Gliwice: Wydawnictwo Helion, 2006, p. 16.; BUDZYŃSKI, W.: *Reklama. Techniki skutecznej perswazji*. Warszawa: Poltext, 2009, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> PEGAZ – a reference to Pegasus, as the winged horse of Greek mythology is or has been included in the logos of many companies (remark added by M. K. W.).

Reaching for shocking messages, one must bear in mind that the use of negative (causing e.g. fear or disgust) emotions in advertising is risky, as its effect may be counterproductive. Instead of actions in the form of purchase or forwarding a link to the ad, the brand can be ‘boycotted’. An example of a brand boycotted as a response to controversial advertising can be the one from January 2016; the Coca-Cola advertisement, on their profile on one of the Russian social networking sites used a map on which the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea occupied by the Russian authorities was shown as being part of the Russian Federation. Indignant citizens of Ukraine announced a boycott of the brand. They declared on the Internet that they would neither drink nor buy the sweet carbonated drink. The embassy of Ukraine in the United States sent letters to Coca-Cola and the State Department in which it expressed its concern about the publication of the map.



Picture 2: Coca-Cola advertising

Source: *Ukraińcy oburzeni reklamą Coca-Coli w internecie. Koncern przeprosza*. [online]. [2015-02-19]. Available at: <<http://www.polskie-radio.pl/5/3/Artykul/1566445,Ukraincy-oburzeni-reklama-CocaColi-w-internecie-Koncern-przeprosza>>.

What is more, a powerful negative message can result in the desire to ‘run away’ from the message and activate the well-known psychological mechanism of denial. Thus, if we want not only to shock but also to achieve the ‘action’, we need to determine our audience and know what taboos not to violate and which can be violated. What shocks the older people does not shock the younger generations, what is shocking in some cultures, is not shocking in others. Remembering a message is not necessarily synonymous with achieving positive associations. The brand can be associated with negatively and disapproval may arouse as the result.

## Controversial Themes in Advertising – Eroticism, Death and Violence

Eroticism is the first thematic area exploited in advertising and it is always likely to attract interest. Erotic and sex symbols appear in advertisements very often. Eroticism is a generic term and it is broader in relation to the concept of sex and human sexuality. Eroticism is a specifically-human feature; it adds supra-biological and supra-reproductive values to sexuality. Eroticism includes biological, psychological, social and cultural dimensions.<sup>23</sup> According to many artists and audiences of advertising, they help improve efficiency, affecting the growth of interest in the product and increasing the desire of ownership.

Erotic themes in advertisements have evolved over the past decades. In the 1970s a storm was caused by an ad of British airlines, using an image of a dressed flight attendant and an ambiguous caption “I am Cheryl. Fly me.”; nowadays such an ad seems to be just funny. In the first half of the 1990s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was unthinkable to advertise sanitary pads, potency remedies, and eroticism in advertising was much less popular than today. For several years, erotic themes have become common in advertising. However, now emotions

<sup>23</sup> LEW-STAROWICZ, Z.: *Encyklopedia erotyki*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literacki Muza SA, 2001, p. 179.



are manipulated by showing sexual themes in a very direct, sometimes vulgar form. Advertising reaches for themes which have not been publicly spoken about until now. Advertisements of global brands, such as Sisley, Dolce & Gabbana, Calvin Klein, show the themes of a sexual orgy, homosexual themes, oral sex, bestiality images and scenes reminiscent of rape. The campaign of 2010 by Diesel wrote the history, its main slogan was the phrase “Sex sells, unfortunately we sell jeans” and models were wearing pants only.

Recently, emotions have been aroused by an advertisement of the Denim X Alexander Wang denim jeans. The collection went on sale on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2014; controversy was aroused on the Internet due to Ann Ewers posing nude with jeans at her ankles. One of the photographs was particularly controversial as the female model was captured from the waist down. We can see her oiled thighs, one hand placed on the womb in a way that suggests masturbation.



Picture 3: Denim X jeans advertisement

Source: Denim Gets Dirty: Denim X Alexander Wang. [online]. [2015-12-15]. Available at: <<http://styleetcetera.net/denim-gets-dirty-denim-x-alexander-wang/>>.

Another erotic accent was used by the British company Antonio Federici Gelato Italiano in conjunction with religious themes for advertising ice cream. Advertising posters presented people dressed up as priests and nuns. One of them shows a pregnant nun, another one shows two priests looking as if they were going to kiss each other, another one shows a nun and a half-naked priest in a unequivocal pose.



Picture 4: Antonio Federici ice cream advertisement

Source: Lody Antonio Federici. Zakazano reklamy z ciężarną zakonnicą. [online]. [2015-12-16]. Available at: <<http://www.pomorska.pl/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100915/CIEKAWOSTKI/978464345>>.

The impact was more powerful due to captions; the poster showing a pregnant nun was accompanied by a caption reading “immaculate conception” and the poster with a pair of priests looking as if they were going to kiss each other was accompanied by a caption “we believe in salvation”. Erotic themes, naked women are currently used even to advertise products associated with death. The global manufacturer of coffins, Lindner, has been issuing a calendar with pictures of half-naked and naked women leaning against coffins for several years in Poland. What is more, one can watch YouTube videos with a photo shoot for the calendar.



Picture 5: Photos from the Lindner manufacturer calendar – 2015

Source: Kalendarz Lindner. [online]. [2015-11-10]. Available at: <<http://kalendarz.lindner.pl/edycja/>>.

In October 2015, Adrian pantyhose advertising placed billboards of the brand with images of a woman in black wearing sexy stockings, leaning against a grave.



Picture 6: Adrian tights advertisement

Source: Rajstopy Adrianna cmentarzu. [online]. [2016-01-07]. Available at: <[http://www.kampanie.poleczne.pl/aktualnosci/8255/rajstopy-adrianna\\_cmentarzu](http://www.kampanie.poleczne.pl/aktualnosci/8255/rajstopy-adrianna_cmentarzu)>.

Death has been a taboo for commercial advertising. While death is no surprise in social campaigns, it often evokes strong emotions – such as disbelief, astonishment, disgust – in advertising clothing or cosmetics. However, it arouses emotions in some only. Some people are indifferent to messages which place a well-known brand, e.g. clothes against death. Death scenes were used by, among others, such brands as Dolce & Gabbana, the Blue Steel deodorant with an image of a slain young man, and the Superette clothing brand, using the theme of death among young people. The ads suggest that, despite the fact that the individuals were killed in exceptional circumstances, for example, being pinched by a lift or shot during having dinner, they look good or smell good even after their death – due to a particular brand of clothing or using the given antiperspirant spray.



Picture 7: Death in the New Zealand Superette brand advertisement

Source: *Najbardziej kontrowersyjne modowe reklamy*. [online]. [2016-01-07]. Available at: <<http://www.figa.pl/Najbardziej-kontrowersyjne-modowe-reklamy-ZDJECIA-a625/3>>.

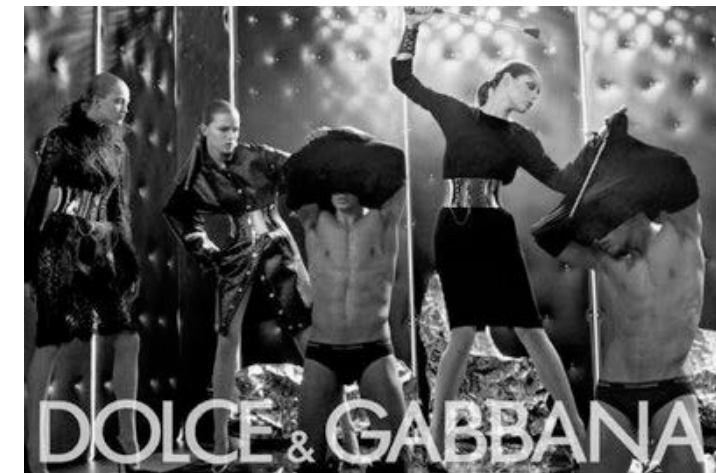
While the theme of death is used in advertisements relatively infrequently, violence, in its various forms, is used very often. Scenes reminiscent of gang rape, drug intoxication, violence against women, men or animals are more and more frequent in advertisements. And again, such brands as Dolce & Gabbana and Calvin Klein can be mentioned here. Both of them used scenes depicting gang rape.



Picture 8: Calvin Klein clothing brand advertisement

Source: *Najbardziej kontrowersyjne modowe reklamy*. [online]. [2015-10-18]. Available at: <<http://www.figa.pl/Najbardziej-kontrowersyjne-modowe-reklamy-ZDJECIA-a625/3>>.

In another Dolce & Gabbana ad, we can see a scene in which a woman swings a whip to hit a half-naked, kneeling man.



Picture 9: Dolce & Gabbana advertisement

Source: *Seks, narkotyki i przemoc – 7 szokujących kampanii reklamowych ze świata mody!* [online]. [2015-11-17]. Available at: <<http://www.ofeminin.pl/moda/7-najbardziej-szokujacych-kampanii-reklamowych-d39470c484480.html>>.

On the other hand, violence against animals can be seen both in commercials and on billboards, an example might be the “Opel man’s best friend” spot in which the owner of a dog wipes his car’s hood with his own dog and then throws the dog inside through the car’s open window.

Another example can be the Polish Cropp brand advertisement showing a mouse cut and the words – “We cut in half” (reduction of prices was meant). In this case, a protest was lodged by the Viva Foundation, dedicated to defending the rights of animals, as well as private individuals. Cropp changed the ad first to withdraw it in the end, but an advertisement with a split pig and the words “we slaughtered prices, not animals” could be seen a short time later.

Another rather controversial example of contemporary advertising might be a spot of a Dutch disco, Housewitz, produced in 2005 and based on the theme of Auschwitz. In the spot, we can see a concentration camp as a disco where DJs are the Kapos, gas chambers are showers, and barracks provide accommodation after the party and the parade ground provides plenty of space for dancing. In turn, an advertisement of a disco in Warsaw used the image of Hitler with the words “ultimate mélange”.

In the case of many of the above-mentioned ads, manipulation is not only about triggering emotions that we would not necessarily like to feel, but also the fact that by bringing a protest against such an advertisement, we unknowingly contribute to the brand’s publicity, which is often the essential aim of the creators producing controversial advertisements.

Creators of advertisements, in the fight for customers’ attention, go back to themes that have so far been considered to be a kind of ‘taboo’ in many cultures and those that are incompatible with legal provisions. A. Jachnis indicates that ethical advertising should not affect religious feelings, political opinions or good taste of decency.<sup>24</sup> However, it frequently violates social norms.

## Conclusions

Shocking or controversial advertising poses a challenge to sexual, religious or moral taboos. Crossing the boundaries of good taste, advertising incompatible with good commercial practice or even causing a scandal is the way to achieve publicity, often at low cost. A few billboards or viral videos released on the Internet are

<sup>24</sup> JACHNIS, A.: *Psychologia konsumenta. Psychologiczne i socjologiczne uwarunkowania zachowań konsumenckich*. Bydgoszcz, Warszawa : Branta, 2007, p. 42.

enough for newspapers and TVs to pick it up and report a ‘scandalous campaign’, providing the product or the company with additional publicity. Profit is what matters, so those responsible for the message go on to further violate the fundamental values of the society only to attract customers’ attention.

The relativism of this type of manipulation in advertising is the problem. Legal restrictions or ethical codes are ineffective, the more that the Internet does not like censorship and the forbidden aspects only increase general interest. However, moral judgments of this kind of messages should be done by each one of their recipients, through the own conscience of individual consumers. T. Kotarbiński feels the same way: “In fact, each of us, regardless of anyone else, appeals to their own conscience. It is a judge over the judges for each of us. It issues the raw, absolute, ultimate judgment in every case of moral judgment.”<sup>25</sup> Next, Kotarbiński, writing about independent ethics, believes that “my own voice of conscience is impossible to be replaced with someone else’s voice.”<sup>26</sup> This does not mean no responsibility at all, as “all those who procure, develop and disseminate advertisements are morally responsible for advertising strategies which are to persuade people to behave in a certain manner; they are jointly responsible for it in a similar way.”<sup>27</sup> This is particularly important in the case of messages directed to kids. The question that arises is – does this type of advertising extend the boundaries of social taboos, are they a response to the changing values of individual societies?

The influence is reciprocal. Cultural values change, many topics that used to be ‘inappropriate’ for public discussion, are now covered in the mass media on a daily basis. The pace of technological changes means that we are dealing with changes in the very process of socialisation. The older generation’s lagging behind civilisation changes results in a reverse socialisation when, in many ways, children teach the older generation, e.g. how to use a certain type of digital communication. A crisis of identity is what follows.

In a situation where the socialisation mechanism begins to change and the mechanisms of social control are thus weakened, advertising creates patterns that set some new trends. This can be especially dangerous because children are able to access such content very easily. Easy access to the Internet enables encountering shocking ads. Advertisements provide for neutralisation of violence, pornography, rape, attacking religious and/or social values, representing the canon of culture.

The words of Professor J. Erenc, commenting on breaking taboos in an interview for a newspaper, can be a good summary: “Social and cultural changes resulting from democratisation and liberalisation of society result in, not so much breaking taboos, but in rethinking their boundaries. And the boundaries are uncompromisingly extended when success becomes the goal. Good taste no longer matters, effectiveness is what does.”<sup>28</sup>

Ads manipulating our emotions, shocking with images, eroticism, violence and death often ignore the boundaries of social taboos. Their creators and the people responsible for their content should be “morally responsible for the advertising strategies which are to persuade people to behave in a certain way. [...] Advertising is neither good nor bad by nature. It is a means, a tool that can be used well or badly.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> KOTARBIŃSKI, T.: *Drogi dociekań własnych. Fragmenty filozoficzne*. Warszawa : PWN, 1986, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> KOTARBIŃSKI, T.: *Drogi dociekań własnych. Fragmenty filozoficzne*. Warszawa : PWN, 1986, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> *Etyka w reklamie, Papieska Rada ds. Środków Społecznego Przekazu*. [online]. [2015-11-15]. Available at: <<http://www.kns.gower.pl/stolica/reklama.htm>>.

<sup>28</sup> *ORP „Kościuszko” wrócił do Gdani z manewrów*. [online]. [2015-11-15]. Available at: <[www.dziennikbałtycki.pl](http://www.dziennikbałtycki.pl)>.

<sup>29</sup> *Etyka w reklamie, Papieska Rada ds. Środków Społecznego Przekazu*. [online]. [2015-11-15]. Available at: <<http://www.kns.gower.pl/stolica/reklama.htm>>.

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