DIGITAL ADVERTISING AS MEMETIC PROPAGANDA

Daniel CIUREL
Politehnica University Timișoara, Romania

Abstract: This paper aims to show the link between rhetoric and memes in advertising discourse. Digital advertising uses memes as availability cascade tools for commercial propaganda. In contemporary economies of attention, it is critical to capture the interest of consumers and memes can help. Memes are cultural units that are passed on to another person or group. Memes have become extremely valuable assets for brands, since they have built-in audiences that recognize and resonate with them. Not only memes can serve as rhetorical *loci*: repositories of largely shared ideas and beliefs, but also, they can be used as genuine rhetorical concepts.

Keywords: Advertising; rhetoric; propaganda; memes; digital participatory culture; availability cascades.

1. Introduction

The concept of meme was coined by the biologist Richard Dawkins, in analogy with gene as structure, mechanisms of distribution and survival are concerned. Although the concept was contested and criticized and even if more research and theorizing is needed, memes are still relevant as complex tools involved in the development of ideas, inasmuch as people can attach them additional details and foster new meanings (Denisova, 2019: 7). Memetics (the science of memes) strive to explain why some ideas, brands, advertising slogans, etc. become persistent and prominent, whereas others do not. Digital advertising is a meme machine: it systematically employs these viral propagation tools, in order to maintain the interest of the consumers but, also, it creates new memes.

Memes are particularly relevant in advertising, but the control of the message is critical. However, meme-based digital campaigns involve major risks because they cannot ensure or secure the control of the message (Murray, Manrai & Manrai, 2014: 333). One of the sources of the meme success is intertextuality. Digital advertising rhetoric draws upon intertextuality as a discursive resource. A central attribute of Internet memes is their sparking of user-created derivatives articulated as parodies, remixes, or mashups. Also, memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways.

Advertising is a form of propaganda for the consumer culture, consisting in a series of appeals (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015: 162) deliberately designed to influence the target individuals to act in some specific way (usually to purchase a product or service). The massive iterations of advertising messages promote consumption as a way of life, establish or reinforce social values, standards, and roles, create hope and fear. In so doing, advertising replaces both religion and art as structures of meaning. The Integrated Marketing Communication model only strengthens the propaganda advertising

framework. The carefully crafted and embedded messages serve the interest of the organization paying for them.

Availability cascades are self-sustaining chains of events which may arise from news or, as I will show later, advertisements and develop over time until they capture public attention. The process can be accelerated on purpose by actors/entrepreneurs with vested interests, using some cognitive heuristics, especially the availability bias (mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to a given person's mind when evaluating a specific topic, concept, method, or decision) and confirmation bias (which validates previous beliefs). The proliferation mechanisms of advertising memes are, basically, availability cascades. The power of internet memes lies in their ability to draw attention to issues and causes worth of interest. The massive exposure of people to advertisements ends up as a memetic frenzy, since memes are mostly processed automatically, with little or no opportunity of critical thinking.

2. Advertising, rhetoric, and memes

Memes are cultural units that are passed on to another individuals or groups and can spread, mutate, evolve, or combine with other memes, engendering new memes etc. In the era of convergence and digital media, the concept of meme has become extremely relevant in communication studies (Shifman, 2014: 7). Memes are mediators of cultural evolution, persistent patterns of information which replicate more or less successfully over time. Three types of memes have been identified (Brodie, 2009: 19-25): distinction-memes, strategy-memes, and association-memes. Distinction-memes categorize and label objects, situations, or persons. Strategy-memes are approximations of cause-and-effect relationships. Association-memes connect different kinds of memes. Every type can be used in advertising and triggers some specific reactions.

Even if meme, as a concept, mutated and evolved extensively from its original meaning, there still are some remaining of the initial elements. Overall, Dawkinsian memes are conceived as behaviorist, deterministic, and atomistic (*mimes*, based on imitation), whereas Internet memes are understood as constructivist, agentic, and holistic (*enthymemes*, based on argumentation). In the original biological sense, the human agency is absent (people are vectors), while the contemporary sociocultural conceptualization emphasizes the human agency (people are actors). But, since human mind is both imaginative and programmable, people are both vectors and actors. Many memes program humans without their perception or intention (Brodie, 2009: 19). The human agency in curating, producing, and disseminating memes is essentially rhetorical (Kennerly & Smith Pfister, 2018: 213). Memes are rhetorical since they are productive (they are designed to produce change), generative (they focus attention to certain subjects or issues) and mimetic (they are based on imitation). These three qualities point to the factors of meme replicability.

Three factors expand the memes replication probability: longevity, fecundity, and fidelity (Denisova, 2019: 6). All these elements are enhanced by the Internet: longevity tends to increase mainly via multiple digital storage devices; fecundity is massively increased over (high velocity of) the digital online channels; and fidelity is assured by the inherent accuracy of the digital media (Shifman, 2014: 17). As memes compete for the attention of human hosts, only the most relevant manage to spread, while the others

become extinct. Certain groups of coadaptive memes tend to replicate as sets, generating meme complexes (memeplexes) which reinforce each element (Shifman, 2014: 9-10).

Memes are conceptually significant for the participatory digital culture. As a (digital) genre, memes contain recurrent patterns and properties and are subject to change, development, etc. Internet memes, as artifacts of participatory digital culture, follow a genre development featuring the stages of maintenance, elaboration, and modification. Maintenance of existing genres occurs when adherence to the rules for creating the genre is maintained without altering the genre. Furthermore, when new circumstances emerge that demand a slight adjustment of genre rules, individuals can elaborate the existing genre rules. Finally, when new circumstances emerge that demand a substantial and consistent departure from existing genre rules, individuals may choose to modify the genre (Wiggins, 2019: 43-44). Memes as a genre of online communication constitute multimodal artifacts of participatory digital culture defined by consumption/production interventions.

Meme genres are based on vernacular creativity of users in their everyday lifestyle practices. Nine Internet meme genres have been identified (Shifman, 2014: 100-118): Reaction Photoshops (images created after memetic photographs, usually incongruous juxtapositions or frozen motions); Photo Fads (staged photos of people who imtate certain positions or actions in various settings); Flash Mobs (spontaneous performances of groups of people surprinsing bystanders in public spaces); Lipdubs (videos in which a person or a group lip movements are synchronized, ussually with a popular song); Misheard Lyrics (amusing mistranslations of spoken sounds to written words); Recut Trailers (critical or parodic remixes or mashups of movie trailers which usually alter or displace the original film genre); LOLCats (pictures of cats accompanied by misspelled captions, which are digital inside jokes); Stock Character Macros (images built on a set of characters representing stereotypical behaviors, with superimposed text); and Rage Comics (amateur-looking comics featuring a repertoire of expressive characters, each associated with a standard behavior). Some of these genres can be created and understood by virtually any user, while others require comprehensive sociocultural knowledge and digital literacy. Each genre has different subtypes which evolve permanently and many are used in advertising.

Memes often perform the function of rhetorical *topoi* (*loci*): argumentative repositories or templates from which other rhetors can extract different persuasive resources. There are three rhetorical dimensions of memes which can be imitated: content, form, and stance (Shifman, 2014: 40-41). Memes are, therefore, an inherently intertextual genre, using antithesis, irony, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or other rhetorical figures and tropes. There are three generic stages of memes: they start as spreadable media (mediated digital content that can be altered and further disseminated), may become emergent memes (through elaboration, remix, or parody), some of which, eventually, will be transformed into fully developed Internet memes (Wiggins, 2019: 44-46). Memes are rhetorical devices of digital discourses based on heteroglossia, subversion and bricolage, creating various cybercommunities.

Memes differ from iconic images and from viral texts, which do not undergo much alteration. They are never fixed symbols, stories, or icons, but interactive aesthetic artifacts that provide a snapshot of the current tendencies of culture and public

discourses and they can have shape, scale and style modified through mutation. For example, the Che Guevara iconic poster demonstrates that icons function in close relation to the subject. Memes, instead, offer a much weaker representation of the original subject and thus hail individual expressiveness and encourage further reiteration of the symbol. People share memes not because they want to disseminate a story, they have found interesting, but because they want to have their input in the retelling and propagation of the story. Memes are created intertextually through bricolage: displacing persons, objects, or situations from their original context and connecting them with totally unrelated concepts in order to convey new meanings. Different memetic elements are combined in novel ways, using rhetorical homologies: formal similarities across different objects, actions, or modes of experience (Brummett, 2018: 275).

Memes have become extremely important assets for brands, partly because they have built-in audiences that recognize and appreciate them (Murray, Manrai and Manrai, 2014: 332). Advertising agencies constantly mine for popular memes in order to embed them in their campaigns. Some brands may evolve as memes (my idea). The risk of brand altering (brandalism) comes not only from artists and culture jammers, but also from ordinary users, as a form of participation in the digital conversation. Digital advertising reworks systematically archetypal narrative structures concerning money, sex, and power as powerful memes. One of the most potent memes is the figure of the rebel, opposing the mainstream, which is widely used in branding strategies. As culture jammers attempt to hijack, challenge, and subvert commercial messages, the corporations resist, respond and counteract by appropriating rebel discourses in new advertisements.

Even if memes propagate at the microsocial level, their impact manifests at the larger social level: they influence mindsets and actions of different groups (Shifman, 2014 18). In other words, memes program human minds to think and behave in specific ways. Advertising memes work by altering the perceptual filters on the favor of the products or services they promote (Brodie, 2009: 30). Brands use memes to program the consumer's minds to purchase (and promote) their products as well. The lifecycle of memes comprises six stages, in which knowledge is expressed, received, processed, stored, retained, and spread (Murray, Manrai and Manrai, 2014: 340). In the first phase, transmission, meme creators (memetic engineers) encode memes in a media form (television commercial, YouTube video, etc.). The next step, decoding, consists in the perception of the meme by a host. During the third stage, infection, the meme enters and inhabits the mental structure of the host. In the fourth step, storage, the meme is stored in the long-term memory of the host. In the fifth stage, survival, the meme outperforms rival memes. In the final phase, retransmission, the meme is redistributed to other hosts.

3. Memetic propaganda and availability cascades

Advertising is the most pervasive form of covert propaganda in contemporary societies or, to put it more bluntly, "advertising is propaganda, and everyone knows it" (Schudson, 2013: 4). Propaganda is defined as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desires intent of the propagandist" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2016: 7). Even if the

term propaganda has achieved a negative connotation, due to its deleterious uses in the XX century, here I employ it as a neutral, descriptive, and broad concept. There have been identified three forms of propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2016: 20-26): white (open, with identified source and objectives, with accurate information); black (covert, in which both source and objectives are concealed, and the information is false or deceptive); and gray (the source or objectives may or may not be correctly identified, and the accuracy or information is uncertain). Usually, advertising takes the form of white propaganda, but it can also turn gray occasionally. Advertising as the spreading a certain lifestyle or worldview ca be considered sociological propaganda (Ellul, 1973: 63). Advertising is effective exactly because people pay it virtually no attention and so they cannot use critical defenses against it (Schudson, 2013: 4).

Advertising not only employs most of the classical repertoire of propaganda tactics (Glitterig Generalities; Transfer; Testimonial; Plain Folks; Card Stacking, and Bandwagon), but also uses pseudo-events and peripheral cues (Fennis and Stroebe, 2010: 235-258) as memetic devices to ensure automatic, pre-attentive processing via hedonic fluency (Fennis and Stroebe, 2010: 49-51) of the commercial messages.

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) can be defined as "the concept and process of strategically managing audience-focused, channel-centered, and results-driven brand communication programs over time" (Arens and Weingod, 2017: 12). IMC ensures strategic coordination of the various marketing elements, from which advertising must achieve action and awareness objectives simultaneously. Digital advertising as IMC is yet another version of propaganda, using behavioral advertising tactics (digital tools and techniques for analyzing, segmenting, and targeting audiences). Memes as artifacts of Integrated Marketing Communication present the risk of becoming empty spectacles, therefore losing their credibility (Horváth and Mitev, 2016: 62).

The main mechanism of memetic propaganda is the *availability cascade.* An *availability cascade* is a self-reinforcing process where a certain meme gains increasing prominence in public discourse, which increases its availability to different individuals, and which therefore makes them more likely to adhere to it and spread it further. Availability cascades are automatic emotional arousal mechanisms (Soules, 2015: 113), using constant repetition and exposure to advertisements, which facilitate overestimation of probability of events that will occur in case of purchasing the promoted items (or of threats in case of not purchasing).

I will use two examples to illustrate the memetic propaganda workings. The legendary 1984 Apple Macintosh advertisement, conceived by copywriter Steve Hayden from Chiat/Day agency and directed by the distinguished filmmaker Ridley Scott (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtvjbmoDx-I, accessed February 2021) Despite the fact that it scored poorly at pretests and that it was shown only once (at Super Bowl), the multi-prized ad was soon hailed as a masterwork and is considered even today as one of the most influential commercials of all times (Twitchell, 2000: 189). The ad went viral on classical, predigital media, which covered it extensively (via an *availability cascade)*, generated massive awareness and increased dramatically the sales of Apple Macintosh computers during the following months. The 1984 sixty seconds ad has had such an enormous viral impact because it used powerful memes, centered on control vs. emancipation and conformism vs. innovation. It can be identified a rhetorical homology of the biblical archetypal narrative of David vs. Goliath (Berger, 2015: 194), introducing

an association meme based on power (there are several binary oppositions: male vs. female, captivity vs. freedom, control vs. resistance, leader vs. followers, dehumanization vs. individuality, hero vs. villain). There are two memeplexes in conflict: totalitarianism (representing the computer giant IBM) and revolution (representing the newcomer Apple Macintosh), bestowing the ad a remarkable narrative tension. The main intertextual reference is to the George Orwell dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with the Big Brother as the central figure, speaking from a huge screen, and a horde of depersonalized, numb people wearing grey uniforms, with shaved heads, marching in rows, and forming an orderly crowd. The mute and expressionless workers are brainwashed by the wooden language from the bureaucratic looking Big Brother on the gigantic TV screen (representing mind control and institutionalized oppression). A young, beautiful, and athletic female, wearing a white shirt and red shorts, carrying a sledgehammer, running along the lines of slaves, being pursued by menacing, heavily equipped police guards, disrupts the established scenario of a totalitarian society, twirling and throwing the sledgehammer and crushing the screen with a big explosion. The young female also embodies the figure of the rebel, opposing mainstream oppressive routine and worldview and starting a revolution for world changing via disruption, attitude, and technology. In sum, the advertisement is a commercial spectacle or pseudo-event, which can be counted as memetic propaganda.

The second example is a parodic advertisement (subvertisement) created by the developer Epic Games as a form of protest against the removal of its video game Fortnite from the Apple's App Store, denouncing the Apple's monopoly over the app ecosystem (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euiSHuaw6Q4&t=43s, accessed February 2021) The subvertisement mimics the 1984 original ad, using cartoon characters from its game. Epic Games employs practically the same memetic propaganda technique to subvert the perceived oppressive control of the tech giant (represented as a talking apple with a worm in its head) on the gaming community. As a remarkable example of digital culture, the new ad is an ironic rebuttal of the former tech-liberator turned evil Big Brother. The skillful use of intertextuality in this subvertisement constitutes a brilliant reminder of the risks for the advertisers in the participatory digital culture.

4. Conclusions

Memes are powerful tools which can be used in digital advertising. They are productive, mimetic, and generative and, as a consequence, rhetorical. Participatory digital culture is fundamentally memetic and consists in massive iterations of intertextual, multimodal, messages. Memes have existed for a long time, but in the digital era they are far more easily created and curated, via availability cascades. Advertising is the most ubiquitous form of propaganda in contemporary societies. In digital advertising, memes are persuasive strategic devices for disseminating commercial messages, but their use is

risky and can turn against the advertisers. Memetic propaganda in advertising can be used ethically or deceitfully.

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