Joanna Dreżewska
The School of Banking and Management in Krakow
visvitae.zzl@gmail.com

Kacper Stabryła-Tatko
The School of Banking and Management in Krakow
kacper.tatko@gmail.com

THE USE OF CONTROVERSY IN ADVERTISING MESSAGES

Introduction

Advertising is an inseparable element of the life of modern people – almost every person in today's world encounters many advertising messages every day. However, advertising is perceived negatively by a vast majority of society. As a result, advertisers must make great efforts to attract the attention of potential recipients. Due to a multitude of persuasion techniques, they reach for newer and attention-grabbing forms of advertising messages. One of the techniques is the use of shockvertising. In Polish nomenclature, this type of messages is referred to as controversial or shocking advertising.

The main goal of the article is to present the theory of shockvertising and the related issues, as well as to examine how society receives this type of message. Moreover, the article discusses, among others, communication models, the role of emotions in advertising and schockvertising. The research part presents the results of the authors' own research, along with the resulting conclusions.

1. Communication model

Communication has a significant impact on human life. Thanks to it, relationships are developed among different people in various social and professional contexts. Communication is a process of organizing messages and media to create meaning[1].

According to G.A. Miller, communication is the transformation of a message from one place to another[2]. There are five elements of the process[3]:

- Source (a person that produces and sends the message);

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[1] S.P. Morreale, B.H. Spitzberg, J.K. Barge, *Komunikacja między ludźmi*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2023, p. 40.
[2] Z. Nęcki, *Komunikacja Międzyludzka*, Antykwa S.C., Kraków-Kluczbork 2000, p. 20.
[3] G.A. Miller, *Language and communication*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., New York 1951, p. 6.

- Transmitter (a biological system or artificial device that converts the message into a form of energy that can be transmitted);
- Channel (the means thanks to which the message overcomes the time and space distance from the sender to the recipient);
- Receiver (the system that reconverts the energy signals to the message);
- Destination (the recipient or a group of recipients to whom the message was sent).

The communicating parties organize the processes of developing, receiving, and replying into verbal and non-verbal messages including the ones that come from media. In order to describe the communication process, understand complex processes and plan strategies for competent actions, communication models are developed. They are verbal or graphic representations illustrating the communication process in simplified, schematic form[4]. They may have a specific characteristic: structural, dynamic, functional, or operational[5].

These models – describing communication as informing, persuading, or creating a relationship – play an important role in changing the process and its awareness.

The model of communication as informing treats the source and the recipient as parties that deal both with coding and decoding. Moreover, it assumes that there is an individual area of meanings, which may overlap between the communicating persons, creating a common area of meanings.

The model of communication as creating a relationship shows that every communication act is a process of developing or determining a relationship with others.

In connection with the topic of the article, the model of communication as persuasion was examined in more detail. This model views communication as the process of influencing others to achieve one's own goals. In the model, person A communicates with person B and the communication process leads to changes in attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors, increasing the influence of person A's views or resulting in the effect intended by person A's. Picture 1 presents the model of communication as persuasion.

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[4] D. Żuchowska-Skiba, *Modele komunikowania*, „Open AGH E-podręczniki", Kraków 2022, p. 2.

[5] T. Goban-Klas, *Media i komunikowanie masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1999, pp. 37-51.

Picture 1. Model of communication as persuasion
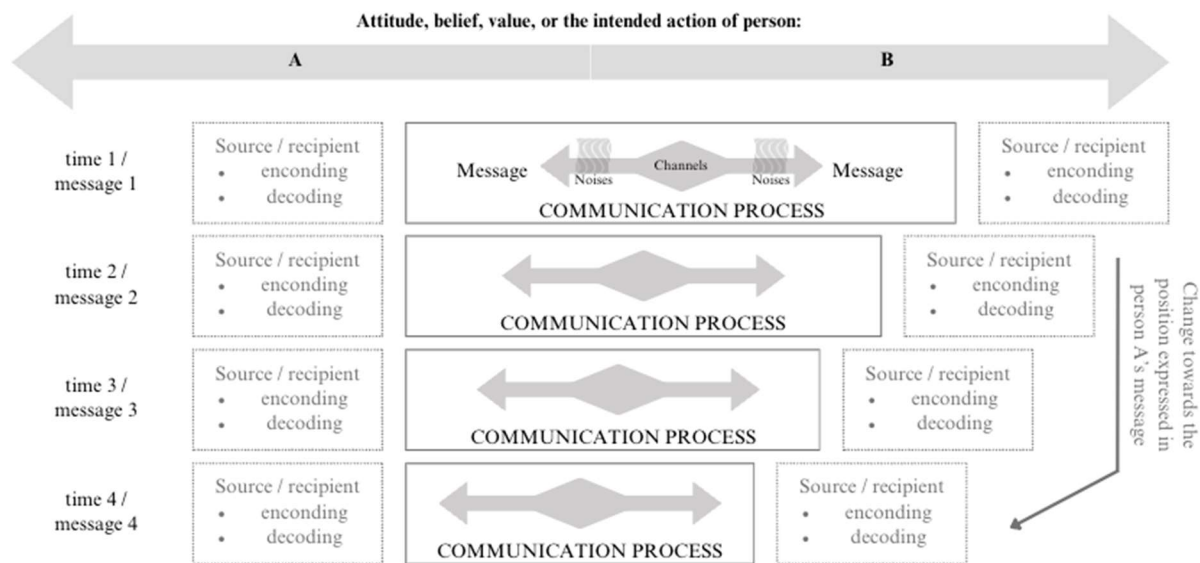
Source: authors' own research based on S.P. Morreale, B.H. Spitzberg, J.K. Barge, *Komunikacja między ludźmi*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2023, p. 33.

In conclusion, communication is effective only when it results in convincing others to do what is expected from them.

2. The role of emotions in advertising messages

Emotions, affects, and feelings are consciously experienced and subjective mental states that accompany everyday behaviors. Advertising draws its power from its own nature and its own method of operation, as well as from the way in which choices and purchases are made[6].

Perceiving, learning, and remembering advertisements depends on psychological laws and the feelings they evoke[7]. There are many ways to recognize feelings[8], and they are reflected by facial expressions, body language and gestures[9]. This was pointed out, among others, by Charles Darwin, who argued that emotions are a product of evolution and that facial muscles evolved to convey information to observers[10]. Although there may be cultural differences in

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[6] R. Health, *Ukryta moc reklamy. Co tak naprawdę wpływa na wybór marki?,* Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2006, p. 14.

[7] A. Falkowski, T. Tyszka, *Psychologia zachowań konsumenckich,* Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2006, p. 69.

[8] R.B. Adler, L.B. Rosenfeld, R.F. Proctor II, *Relacje interpersonalne. Proces porozumiewania się,* Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2011, p. 236.

[9] S.K. Ciccarelli, J.N. White, *Psychologia*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2015, p. 362.

[10] Ibidem, p. 363.

facial expression, some aspects are universal and all human beings, regardless of culture, express emotions in the same way. Picture 2 presents basic emotions which include (from left to right in the picture) anger, fear, disgust, joy, surprise, and sadness[11].

Picture 2. Expressing emotions through facial expressions

Source: authors' own research based on S.K. Ciccarelli, J.N. White, *Psychologia*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2015, p. 363.

Emotions occur, among others, in the course of interpersonal interactions, while watching films, reading books, listening to music as well as when watching advertisements or recalling them. Emotions may be positive or negative; the positive ones include joy, love, and happiness; the ones people strive to experience[12]. Advertisement producers can create a positive attitude to products with the use of classical conditioning – for example one way to evoke the feeling of tenderness and sympathy is to use the childlike schema. A positive emotional state does not require analyzing the source of its origin[13]. The use of sexual stimuli and humor in advertising is also quite common.

In addition to positive feelings, advertising producers frequently manipulate with negative emotions, especially the feeling of anxiety[14]. Advertisements that take advantage of this type of emotion convey the message that if a given product or service is not used, something bad will happen; however, research showed that advertising with a moderate level of anxiety is best remembered. Negative emotions cause people to feel uncomfortable and, consequently,

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[11] Ibidem, p. 365.

[12] A. Falkowski, T. Tyszka, *Psychologia zachowań konsumenckich*, op. cit., pp. 70-75.

[13] M. Grębowiec, *Reklamy kontrowersyjne i ich wpływ na podejmowanie decyzji nabywczych przez konsumentów*, „Zeszyty Naukowe – Polityki europejskie, finanse i marketing" 2010, No. 3 (52), p. 445.

[14] A. Falkowski, T. Tyszka, *Psychologia zachowań konsumenckich*, op. cit., pp. 5-78.

may be a trigger for change. What is particularly important for advertisers – evoking emotions in recipients automatically makes recipient focus on the sources of negative mood[15].

What is more, negative emotions in advertising are not limited to fear. Sometimes, troublesome emotions are evoked, which according to Z. Zalewski are wicked, unwanted, and forbidden. They include envy, malicious joy, jealousy, revenge, hatred, disgust, contempt, and shame[16]. As Z. Zalewski points out, even though such emotions can be problematic for people, they may have a positive significance although they are not always correctly understood[17].

3. Controversy in advertising

The Polish word *reklama* originates from the Latin *reclamare*, which means *to make noise* or *a fuss*[18]. It comes from an ancient method of attracting the attention of potential customers by primitive shouting[19]. Obviously, modern advertising uses much more complex methods. However, it must be pointed out that the purpose of both the ancient and modern advertising is the same – to attract attention and inform buyers about products or services[20].

As it was mentioned above, advertising is an inseparable (but not necessarily desired) element of most people's lives[21]. Nowadays, due to the multitude and general availability of information, advertisers must apply newer and newer sales techniques to draw attention to their products/services[22]. One of such techniques is the use of shock advertising.

Controversial advertising, also referred to as shockvertising (the term comes from the combination of *shock* and *advertising*), is a type of message that includes unconventional advertising techniques such as the use of motifs and topics that are considered risky, cause outrage, or may be offensive or iconoclastic[23]. In many cases, these are topics that present

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[15] M. Grębowiec, *Reklamy kontrowersyjne i ich wpływ...*, op. cit., p. 446.

[16] Z. Zaleski, *Od zawiści do zemsty: społeczna psychologia kłopotliwych emocji*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, Warszawa 1998, p. 7.

[17] Ibidem, p. 55.

[18] E. Chludzińska, *Rodzaje reklamy i metody jej badania*, „Studia Łomżyńskie" 2010, No.21, p. 359.

[19] Z. Bajka, *Krótka historia reklamy na świecie i w Polsce*, „Zeszyty Prasoznawcze" 1993, No. 3-4, p 16.

[20] R. Nowacki, *Reklama – podręcznik,* Difin sp. z.o.o., Warszawa 2006, p. 39.

[21] A. Makowiec, *Prawne aspekty reklamy w sieci – zagadnienia wybrane*, „Kultura-Media-Teologia" 2014, No. 18, p. 10.

[22] S. Misiak, *Nieetyczna reklama a sukces firmy*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Poznaniu" 2011, No. 171, p. 299.

[23] C. Soreanu, *Artistic strategies in Oliviero Toscani's advertising*, "Scientific view of the modern problems of cultural heritage and arts in the context of social development. Klironomy, 1" 2021, No. 1, p. 3.

elements of violence, bold erotism, or refer to religious issues. The purpose of this type of activity is to draw attention to a given product/service[24].

One of the most famous examples of this type of advertising is the campaign by O. Toscani. It was developed for the clothing brand *United Colors of Benetton* (UCoB) and published in many countries in 1982-2000[25]. The campaign was not based on the presentation of the brand's products but on – as A. Żukowska puts it – "the artist's original creations in the form of studio advertising photography"[26]. The photographs depicted controversial topics in an unprecedented way, often disregarding the accepted rules or norms of social behavior[27]. The campaign slogan was *All the colors of the world,* and it became a part of the company's image. After a several-year break, UCoB returned to developing advertisements that drew attention to social issues such as racism, intolerance between religions and cultures, and AIDS. The most famous advertisements include the one presenting three hearts (presumably people) overlaid with text saying White, Black, Yellow, the Unhate campaign showing political and religious leaders kissing each other, and the advertisement of a man dying of AIDS and mourned by his loved ones[28].

In his book, O. Toscani points to the positive aspect of the company's image that was created after developing a controversial advertisement in the form of a social campaign. He presents a hypothetical (but based on the same principle as in the case of UCoB) situation in which Fiat (car manufacturer) decides to launch a social campaign about drug addicts and their families. It is worth recalling O.Toscani's conclusion that Fiat's reputation would significantly improve. Company advertisements could both educate and emotionally stimulate, not to mention supporting talents and artists[29].

In the approach presented both in the book and in his work for UCoB, O.Toscani argued that controversial campaign, especially when it is a social campaign, may include a message

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[24] M. Dołhasz, *Specyfika reklamy kontrowersyjnej w oparciu o wybrane przykłady reklamy telewizyjnej w Polsce,* „Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Pedagogicznego Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej w Nowym Sączu" 2022, No. 1, p. 112.

[25] A. Żukowska, *Komunikacja społeczna według Oliviero Toscaniego – fenomen reklam realizowanych dla United Colors of Benetton w latach 1989-1994*, „Media Biznes Kultura" 2017, No. 2(3), pp. 151-152.

[26] Ibidem, p. 152.

[27] L. German, *The relation between "seeing" and "being seen": a diachronic perspective of photographic view*, "Comunicarea interpersonalǎ - Arta și educația ca mijloace de comunicare," Ars Longa, Jassy 2018, pp. 187-193.

[28] *Benetton reklama – jak wykorzystać kontrowersje w reklamie*, https://www.reklamowaagencja.pl/benetton-reklama-jak-wykorzystac-kontrowersje-w-reklamie/ (Accessed: 24 June 2024).

[29] O. Toscani, *Reklama – uśmiechnięte ścierwo*, Delta W-Z, Warszawa 1995, p. 20.

that is much more profound than the desire to cause a cheap sensation which the authors of this type of messages are often accused of.

4. Methodology and the results of the authors' own research

The goal of the survey research was to determine the society's attitude to the use of controversy in advertising and the acceptance level of this type of advertising. To achieve the objective, the authors formulated four research questions:

- What topics in advertising messages are considered most controversial?
- What is the attitude to the use of this type of technique in advertising messages?
- How are such advertising messages perceived?
- Does society support the use of controversial advertising to draw attention to significant social issues?

To conduct the survey, the authors put forward two hypotheses:

1. Even though controversial advertising is not perceived positively, society indicates that it is interesting.

2. In selected cases, society can accept the use of controversy in advertising.

The survey was conducted in a mixed group of 50 people. The research group consisted of people in the age range of 18-59 years (the respondents aged 18-26 years were the dominant group, women accounted for 70% and men 30%) All research participants declared secondary or higher education. It should be emphasized that a vast majority – as many as 84% - declared that they were exposed to advertising messages several times a day.

The respondents were presented with a definition of controversial advertising along with three examples of marketing campaigns using the above-mentioned technique. The advertisements presented were as follows: the non-governmental organization WWF advertisement discouraging the purchase of souvenirs made from protected animal species, a campaign advertising Prada handbag, and the advertisement of Adrian company producing tights. All three advertisements fully met the definition of shock advertising.

The research method was an anonymous survey questionnaire. The survey was distributed via the *Google Forms* Internet platform. Apart from metric questions concerning the age, gender and education of the respondents, the questionnaire consisted of eight questions about the attitude to controversial advertising, its reception and the frequency of encountering this type of messages.

Based on the survey research, it was found that the topics considered by the respondents to be the most controversial are those related to harming weaker people or those that directly concern them and may be contrary to their system of values or views. Therefore, the respondents indicated that the most controversial topic used in advertising is violence (64% of responses), followed by religion (60%) and politics (58%). Moreover, the respondents indicated racism (46% of responses) and sex (38%).

The results are given in graph 1.

Graph 1. Topics considered to be the most controversial
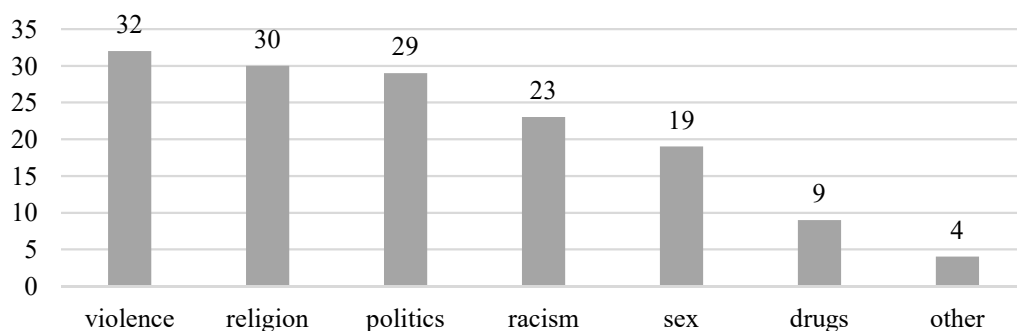
Source: authors' own research.

When asked about their attitude to the use of this type of technique, the responses varied significantly but negative attitude prevailed. Over half of them (54%) indicated that the respondents have a negative attitude, while 26% of respondents had no opinion on this matter and – which is interesting – only 4% of the respondents replied that their attitude to shockvertising is positive. This shows clearly that society does not have a positive attitude to this type of advertising. The results are presented in graph 2.

Graph 2. Attitude to the use of controversy in advertising
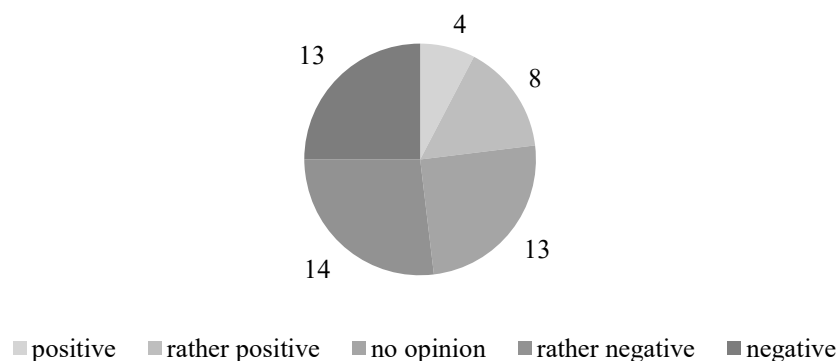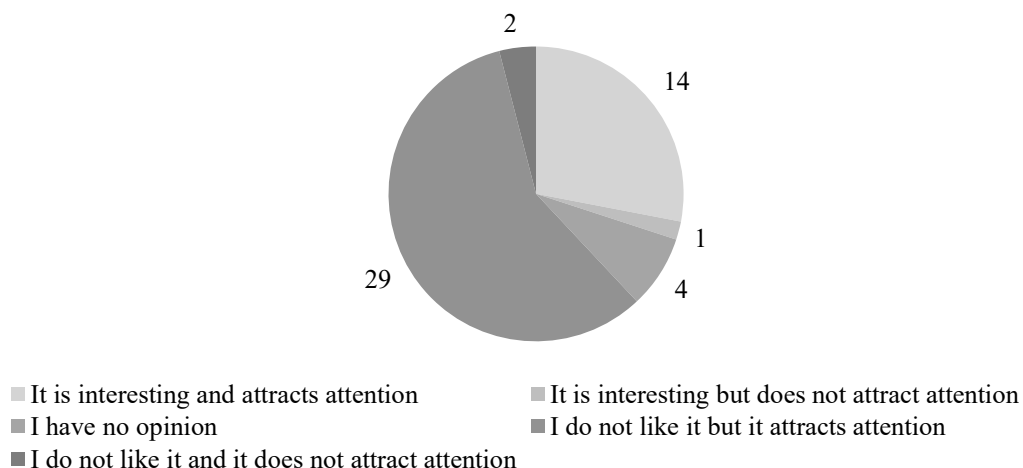

Source: authors' own research.

Another question in the questionnaire concerned the attitude of respondents to the use of this type of advertising message. The responses confirmed in a way their negative attitude because as many as 58% of the respondents indicated that although they do not like such advertisements, they attract their attention. In turn, 28% of the respondents indicated that shockvertising is interesting for them and attracts their attention.

The results make it possible to determine that in total as many as 86% of the respondents indicated that shockvertising attracts their attention. This in turn may lead to the conclusion that despite a low level of acceptance for this type of technique, it meets the basic assumption of advertising, which is to attract the recipient's attention. The results are given in graph 3.

Graph 3. Perception of shockvertising

- It is interesting and attracts attention
- It is interesting but does not attract attention
- I have no opinion
- I do not like it but it attracts attention
- I do not like it and it does not attract attention

Source: authors' own research.

The final issue in the research survey was the conditional acceptance to use shockvertising to draw attention to important social problems. The research question concerned advertisements (usually social ones) aimed at drawing attention to such problems. J.W. Coleman and H.R. Kerbo define a social problem as a condition that a significant number of people consider a problem[30]. To the question *Do you approve of using controversial advertising to draw attention to significant social problems (e.g., domestic violence, sexual harassment, alcoholism)* as many as 72% of the respondents gave an affirmative answer, while only 14% of the respondents clearly stated that they were against this type of technique. This shows that despite the lack of

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[30] J.W. Coleman, H.R. Kerbo, *Social Problems*, Pearson Education, Inc., New Jersey 2002, p. 3.

support for this type of advertising technique, society can accept or even support its use. The results are given in graph 4.

Graph 4. Conditional acceptance of using shockvertising
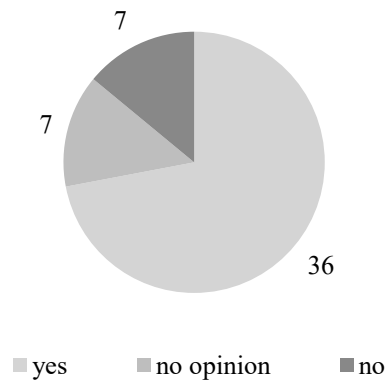
Source: authors' own research.

Conclusions

The conducted research and its results allowed the authors to verify positively both hypotheses. Even though the respondents indicated a negative attitude to shockvertising, they stated that this type of message is interesting. Moreover, what is more interesting, a vast majority of the respondents indicated that they were able to accept this type of message, and even to support it, when its goal is to draw peoples' attention to important social issues.

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Abstract

The article discusses the use of specific advertising techniques. It starts with the presentation of the types and the operation of messages. Then, it discusses the role of emotions in advertising and the theory of schockvertising. Finally, it presents the results of the research on the society's attitude to this kind of advertising practice.

Key words

Advertising, marketing, shockvertising, shock advertising, controversy, emotions, communication, persuasion.