

DIGITAL BOVARISM: ADVERTISING, RHETORIC, AND IDENTITY

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Abstract: This paper aims to show how the consumers shape their identities via advertising rhetoric. The contemporary advertising industry is defining and cultivating customers identity, using tactics such as mental simulation and narrative transportation, based on data-driven social profiling. The consumers are lured in constructing the types of persona which marketers strive to establish, engaging in what I call digital bovarism: an idealized, glamorized and, ultimately, fictional representation of themselves, developed through alienating rhetorical visions. This rhetorical process can be understood using symbolic convergence theory and fantasy-theme analysis, as the individual's efforts to be unique result in more similarity via mimetic practices of consumption.

Keywords: Advertising; rhetoric; persona; digital bovarism; fantasy theme.

1. Introduction

People use objects to express their identity, to construct more or less accurate notions of self, and to cope with their physical and social environment (Davis, 2013: 42). Advertising plays an important role in this process. People form attitudes not only of the brands or of the consumption, but also of themselves. Therefore, identity is a rhetorically constructed representation of the self. Brands nudge individuals to shape their image and identity, conferring them status, charisma, and knowledge. Branded individuals are those who are led to purchase only brand products and certain brands, in fact. They become, so to speak, the sum of their brands. The key issue of using brands to shape a sense of self is that individuals are affected by changes in fashion, meaning that they find themselves continually changing their "images" and, in the process, any sense of self they had becomes obsolete and compromised. (Berger, 2015: 84)

In postmodern, digital societies, where there are no all-encompassing and dominating philosophical and ethical belief systems, the notion of a coherent identity is not valued any longer, people are constantly changing their identities (Parsons, Maclaran & Chatzidakis, 2018: 21), and all these transformations are tied to purchasing the right products. Postmodern societies are consumption societies in which people are always looking for the next craze and sample different styles and identities to suit their whims. The problem is that identity suggests a certain coherence, and a constantly changing identity is a contradiction in terms and it has an alienating effect.

2. Digital persona, advertising, and online bovarism

The concept of bovarism was coined by the French philosopher Jules de Gaultier, based on the novel *Madame Bovary* of the 19th century French writer Gustave Flaubert, in order to present the tendency of people to develop idealized, glamorized and, ultimately, fictional representation of themselves, to alter reality by transforming their perceptions of self. In Gaultier's view, bovarism is a useful mechanism of human evolution and

consists in a composite of constantly evolving selves. Individuals engage in bovarism as a means of the production of the real (Gaultier, 1993: 144-145), based on their rejection of the objective truth. My conjecture is that in the digital world the concept of bovarism may prove useful and relevant regarding the consumer response to advertising rhetoric.

In the digital age, the bovaric tendency gets even more significant, because the multiplying of the opportunities, but also because of the nature of online interactions. In the ubiquitous digital media, people are exposed to more people, cultures and perspectives competing for attention on a global scale, and, consequently, they develop imaginary, more fluid selves (Miller, 2020: 207). Moreover, nowadays individuals can perform different drama acts of self-presentation to various audiences at the same time.

People need recognition, so they engage in comparison, emulation, and competition. Personal identity is created through self-schemas (conglomerations of traits, values and beliefs), which influence the cognitive and behavioral processes (Fennis & Stroebe, 2010: 67). As individuals try to differentiate themselves, they need to affiliate to models and label themselves by reference to that model imposed by advertising, which obliterates any real difference (Baudrillard, 1998: 88). Being increasingly disconnected from the traditional sources of cultural influence, audiences turn to advertising as a socializing mediator and identity provider (Davis, 2013: 41). Dissatisfied with their egos and lifestyles, individuals actively develop illusive but desirable identities via consumption. The use of commodities becomes less functional and more symbolic. I define as digital bovarism the tendency to assume a virtual, simulated, brand-based identity, to appear as someone else, more intelligent, more handsome or more knowledgeable in cyberspace. Advertising sends paradoxical injunctions to people, urging them to be unique, spontaneous, or simply to be themselves, engaging in pseudo-empowerment. This vast encomiastic apparatus creates glamour through fantasies which are relevant to the potential consumers (Berger, 1972: 146).

Digital persona is forged in this process, on the basis of symbolic convergence theory, which explains the fantasies people develop. Symbolic convergence theory is based on the assumption that communication creates reality: experiences of objects or ideas will be different, depending on the symbols used to frame them. Also, symbols not only create reality for individuals but their meanings for symbols can converge to create a shared reality (Jasinski, 2001: 247).

The fantasy theme (the basic unit of symbolic convergence theory) constitutes the means through which the creative and imaginative interpretation of events is accomplished in communication. Fantasy themes aggregate as rhetorical visions: unified combinations of scripts which drive certain interpretations of reality and motivate people to action. Fantasy types are recurrent stories constructed from fantasy themes (Jasinski, 2001: 249). When people have shared a fantasy theme, they have charged that theme with meanings and emotions that can be set off by an established symbolic cue. These symbolic cues are frequently extracted from advertising discourses and employed in different settings and for different communicative purposes (Ciurel, 2020: 181).

There are three mechanisms of this process: persuasive imagery, mental simulation, and narrative transportation.

Persuasive imagery consists in the use of compelling pictorial symbols, subtle visual stimuli (chromatic and compositional), which can activate, usually after multiple exposures, an availability heuristic and thus can interfere with the perceptual and decisional processes of individuals.

Mental simulation (enactive imagery) is the imitative mental representation of events. It can be understood as the cognitive construction of hypothetical scenarios, including anticipations of certain future events, fantasizing about less likely future events, or reconstructing past events, mixing in hypothetical elements. Mental simulations are usually in the form of stories or narratives (Escalas, 2004: 37).

People have a tendency to simulate events and therefore they create stories, and, as a consequence, they may be transported by their own narratives. The narrative structure of stories consists of two important elements: chronology and causality. First, narrative thought organizes events in terms of a temporal dimension: episodes with a beginning, middle, and end. Second, narrative thought structures story elements into an organized framework that establishes relationships between the elements and allows for causal inferencing. Narrative organization integrates and articulates universal knowledge about goal-oriented human action events consisting in purposes, performances, and outcomes (Escalas, 2004: 38).

Stories persuade via transportation, which can be defined as the extent to which individuals become entrapped in the story or immerse into a narrative (Escalas, 2004: 38). The Transportation-Imagery Model (TIM) explains the persuasive potential of narratives. The synergy of three factors (cognitive attention, mental imagery and emotional involvement) activates narrative transportation (Zheng, Phelps & Pimentel, 2019: 57). If an advertisement is able to generate a simulation about using the brand being advertised, positive feelings may become linked to the ad and brand. As people imagine themselves using a product or a service, they think about themselves in future scenarios, linking personal experience and the product or service, and are psychologically transported by these fantasies. Narrative persuasion can achieve strong sleeper effects in the long term, since the events which are cognitively available tend to be perceived as being more plausible. This process precludes individuals from critically evaluating the advertisements and drives the manifestation of bovarism.

3. Advertising and rhetoric: digital dramaturgy and fantasy-themes

Individuals within the contemporary consumer cultures engage in different online identity performances: dramaturgical strategies of presenting the person's self (Goffman, 1959: 18) within digital settings. The dramatic effects are repertoires of digitally-staged performances pointing to an assigned self. The digital face can be sincere or cynical (Goffman, 1959: 19), but both can be activated at different times or even simultaneously. The front of the performance is the expressive equipment employed by the individuals (Goffman, 1959: 22). The script of these performances follows some archetypal patterns, which allow for the hedonic fluency: the subjective psychological readiness with which advertising stimuli can be perceived and processed (Fennis & Stroebe, 2010: 49).

Consumption is a powerful instrument of social control (Baudrillard, 1998: 84). Digital media advertising distorts the self-image of users, inducing them to assume predetermined stances. Advertising rhetorical processes create brand-new vicarious

(surrogate) identities aiming at a second persona (Jasinski, 2001: 68). The implied reader of advertising discourses (Schudson, 2013: 5) is an idealized version of the self (by persuasive imagery, mental simulation & narrative transportation). This pseudo-self that results from the simulated online reality (Yakob, 2021: 115) is the manifestation of digital bovarism. This simulated sense of identity becomes addictive (Yakob, 2021: 116).

Digital bovarism can take three forms, concerning the level of adherence to the advertising claims: influential, transactional and adversarial.

In the influential bovarism, people are manipulated and used by brands to assume unwittingly whatever identity that brands claim to bestow. In this case, advertisements work as interpellations: they summon tacit acceptance of their presuppositions which legitimize certain values, practices and lifestyles (Warner, 2003: 74). Brands are sources of identity. The compliance gets past brand loyalty to complicity and investment of subjectivity in favor of a gratifying, albeit shallow fantasy life.

In the transactional bovarism, people consciously, creatively and selectively use brands as confirmation and maintenance devices of self-presentation, in order to achieve a carefully designed and distinctive identity. Individuals negotiate the claims that brands make and accept, deny, or adapt them to their particular needs or purposes (affiliation, distinction, conversation, or exploration). Brands are used as resources for construction and maintaining identity (Parsons, Maclaran & Chatzidakis, 2018: 35).

Adversarial bovarism consists in the dissent of people who refuse the mainstream brands and use underground brands to create a distinctive, anti-establishment identity. Since the identity formation can be also accomplished as resistance and opposition to the consumer dominant culture and advertising (culture jamming, youth subcultures and countercultures), subverted mainstream brands and underground brands are used as resources for creating a nonconformist identity. Conspicuous anti-consumption demystifies and repurposes advertising rhetoric, but advertisers usually neutralize these contentious discourses by hijacking and integrating them in their new commercial messages.

In the contemporary participatory culture (Miller, 2020: 101, 104), the identity prosumers (a term denoting the blending of producer and consumer, coined by the American futurologist Alvin Toffler) use bricolage, assembling different elements taken from advertising discourses to create a proxy digital persona (mashups, remixes and memes). The current interactive marketing communication allows people to create different intertextual, hybrid identities. Digital bovarism is a form of cyber-narcissism, a result of framing of both the collective (brand tribes) and the individual identity. This cyber-self consists in a network of ephemeral assemblages, fusions and affiliations, mediated by advertising discourses and based on rhetorical identification (in the Burkean sense). Identification can be associative, dissociative, or collective (Jasinski, 2001: 306), inducing three types of bovarism. Associative digital bovarism can appear in relation with values (beauty, progress, happiness) or with individuals (e.g., celebrities in advertisements and influencers), but also newly created online models (virtualstars) or replicants (Wood, Solomon & Englis, 2008: 388). Users engage with (similar or less similar) role models, characters, and fashions. Dissociative digital bovarism employs oppositional positioning: the identity as contrary to a different entity. Collective digital bovarism operates at the tribal level, as membership to a certain group, whose members share the same fantasy themes and worldviews.

Identities are multiple, ongoing combinations for each individual and they are always narratives of becoming self (Storey, 2017: 88). Digital identities reflect the way individuals want to see themselves and how they want others to see them (Yakob, 2021: 116), process during which they become brands too, virtual doppelgangers of the advertised brands. People are conditioned to redefine themselves (Miller, 2020: 205) and their new self-concepts are forged by consumption constellations (Tepperman & Meredith, 2021: 49, 51). The struggle for authenticity can entrap individuals in the conformist lifestyle of consumption.

In the end, digital bovarism is a depersonalization mechanism mediated by advertising rhetoric, in which self-deception and compensatory snobbism shape a fictional self. The rhetoric of display functions as an impression management device. Brands encapsulate myths and hence they possess their own rhetorical persona (ethos), which can be, at least to some extent, transferred to their customers, and, thus, they provide on-demand personalities (Yakob, 2021: 12). In the process, digital persona emphasizes charisma and creates a mediated and frequently perverted ethos of brand consumers, dissolved in the ever-expanding brandscape.

4. Conclusions

Consumers construct and display their identities via practices of consumption, using brands as impression management devices. Digital bovarism appears as a rhetorical construction of identity, validated by advertising, in the cybersphere. Staging identity through consumption develops more glamorous digital persona, by displaying expressive use of brands. Digital bovarism means, on the one hand, that individuals are manipulated by advertising to assume new cyber-identities, and, on the other hand, that they use the advertised brands to create their own online identities. Digital personal brand of the consumers is the aggregated result of advertising rhetoric and bovaristic self-presentation. In promoting some brands as consumers, people also promote themselves, becoming prosumers of both commercial and personal brands. Advertising is an important agent in the rhetorical construction of the bovaric reality and identity: cyber-advertisements mediate and remediate the digital selves of the consumers. Identity management in digital bovarism emerges as a positioning mechanism, which can be emancipatory, functional, or disabling.

This paper intends to be a starting point in studying digital advertising rhetorically, from the perspective of the cyber-consumer, whose networked self is constantly shifting among multiple affiliations. The notion of digital bovarism aims to define and comprehend the cyber-self of the consumers from both consumer response and rhetorical grounds. Further research should develop the rhetorical investigations and empirical explorations of the aspects, expressions, and circumstances of digital bovarism.

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