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The Social and Cultural Impact of Advertising among Chilean Youths

El impacto social y cultural de la publicidad entre los jóvenes chilenos

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the impact of advertising among Chilean youngsters of different socioeconomic background. We aim to identify the relationship that this group establishes with advertising and, in particular, the way they incorporate it in their socialization strategies. We do not address what advertising does to youngsters, but instead what youngsters do with advertising in their practices of appropriation and reception of it. The research design included focus groups of male and female youngsters living in Santiago de Chile between 15 and 24 coming from both high and low-income background. The conclusion of our research is that advertising is assumed by youngsters as a constitutive part of the media offering, which is used both as commercial information and as a cultural referent of new aesthetic values. Furthermore, advertising represents a socializing agent for this group because they incorporate the content of advertising in their exchange with their peers. Finally, this work concludes that advertising represents a leading sociocultural fact for the Chilean youth, because it is a central actor of their daily life.

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo analiza el impacto de la publicidad entre jóvenes chilenos de distintos estratos socioeconómicos, con el objetivo de identificar la relación que establecen con la publicidad y la particular incorporación que hacen de ésta en sus estrategias de socialización. Por lo tanto, no se pretende dar cuenta de lo que la publicidad hace con los jóvenes, sino de lo que los jóvenes hacen con la publicidad a través de sus prácticas de recepción y apropiación. Para esto, se realizó un estudio sobre la base de grupos de discusión a jóvenes de ambos sexos, de edades entre 15 y 24 años provenientes de los niveles socioeconómicos altos y bajos residentes en Santiago de Chile. Los resultados que arrojó el estudio dan cuenta de que la publicidad es asumida como parte constitutiva de la oferta medial, la que es utilizada como información comercial y referente cultural de nuevos valores estéticos. Junto con esto, la publicidad adquiere el carácter de agente de socialización, al incorporar los contenidos de los mensajes publicitarios en las conversaciones con sus pares. Finalmente, este trabajo concluye que la publicidad entre los jóvenes chilenos estudiados, se presenta como una realidad sociocultural de primer orden, en cuanto actor central de su vida cotidiana.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Advertising, youth, media, daily life impact, Cultural Studies, product consumption.
Publicidad, jóvenes, medios de comunicación, vida cotidiana, estudios culturales, consumo.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a study, led by researchers at the Universidad Diego Portales (Diego Portales University)¹, aimed at uncovering the significance of advertising in the lives of young people of high and low socioeconomic status on the basis of their own experience as consumers of advertising.

From a conceptual standpoint, the assumption is that consumption today, and by extension advertising, plays a central role in the cultural life of Chileans, and is directly linked to the new social imaginary, affecting what and how Chileans represent themselves in their daily life (UNDP, 2002). Moreover, advertising is understood as a substantial part of the social construct of reality, in the sense of projecting a certain image of society. As in the case of mass media (the media), the role of advertising in this construct is conditioned by how it is applied. In short, the impact of advertising on the perception of social reality is a process where cultural formation shapes reality in order to guide, understand and participate in daily interactions (Wolf, 1996; Belmonte & Guillamon, 2005).

2. Theoretical foundation

Maffesoli (2000) points out that individuals of all societies need to represent themselves through an aesthetic image, leading to his proposal that the individual is ultimately their lifestyle and projected image. The value of the image, then, defines consumer culture fundamentally as an aesthetic experience. Advertising has a similar direct relationship with the construction of the social imaginary through media-disseminated images, where it takes on a central role in two ways: by financing the media and by evoking the emotions of everyday life. As a result of this relationship, the very self-image, along with that of others, is strongly influenced by an advertising imaginary which seeks the identification of the consumer with a particular brand (UNDP, 2002). It is through the agency of advertising in consumer society that market forces become the central axis not only of the economic sector, but also of the social and cultural, implanting and generating a new set of meanings, values, ways of thinking and interpreting reality, new world-views and behavior models (Catalan, 1982 & Lomas-Garcia, 2001). As Fontaine (2001) argues, the cultural relevance of advertising resides in its ability to transcend trade and dictate patterns of behavior, modes of relationships, value scales and social aspirations.

2.1. Youth, advertising and Cultural Studies

Chile has experienced cultural changes in recent

years that have had a profound effect on youth. From transformation of the family to economic and cultural globalization, the weakening of traditional forms of authority, changes in the working world, expansion of consumer society and the centrality of mass media to contemporary culture, these changes have significantly altered the fabric of the world of young people (Sepúlveda, 2005).

Young people have, in consequence, developed new cultural skills, resulting in personal forms of appropriation and signification of the varied media content they access.

A significant number of academic studies in media and advertisement, with corresponding theoretical referents, have assumed from the outset that audiences tend to be passive when confronted with messages. Busquet (2008) provides a critical view of this notion, which he identifies with the theory of mass society, referred to as 'massmediological temptation' by Bourdieu, and which seeks to replace traditional methods of sociology with a pseudo-scientific, hyper-ideological discourse.

That a worrying number of intellectuals subscribe to this perspective is due to the false notion that anyone can interpret the signs of modernity and thus produce a pessimistic narrative of modern civilization. For Busquet it is a pseudo-sociology coupled with the spontaneous sociology of the common man, who still believes that social phenomena can be taken at face value and be immediately understood.

This notion of a supposed passivity of the audience is likewise challenged by a number of stances that conceive the receiver as an active subject with respect to the media and advertising. For Corrales (2005) this is true of the approaches developed by the Uses and Gratifications theory, and by the Cultural Studies field.

In both cases, the idea is to discover what receivers do with messages, leaving aside the 'Frankfurtian pessimism' of critical theory. Corrales argues, further, that each advertisement contains within it a 'preferred reading' that coincides with the intended meaning, but mediated by the experience of the receiver. Thus, through creative re-appropriation of content, unique codes of interpretation develop, including readings opposed to the interests of the sender.

Thompson (1998) points out that the meaning of a message conveyed by the media is not static, stable and transparent to all recipients in equal measure. Meaning is a complex, changing phenomenon, transformed by the process of reception, interpretation and reinterpretation. Hence, the meaning of a message depends on the decoding structure, allowing the recei-

ver to change its proposed effect (Vergara, 2008: 333; Kotilainen, 2009). In addition, Cultural Studies is centered on the various forms of signification and incorporation of media-disseminated messages in the everyday lives of youth. From the outset the main objective of Cultural Studies is the study of contemporary culture and society.

This view is characterized by a more positive approach than that of the Frankfurt School with respect to the products of mass culture, and centers on comprehension, meaning and the place of culture in the experience of particular social groups (McQuail, 1996: 97-98).

2.2. International experience in the study of advertising among youths

Of the studies consulted on the meanings and uses of advertising among youths, those by Ritson and R. Elliott (1999) and Mitchell, Maklin and Paxman (2007) are worth citing. The former study claims that advertising functions more as a socializing agent than as an information tool for product consumption. The study of the uses of advertising in adolescents is relevant given that this group is highly active in the social use of mass media, and, in the case of advertising, because there is a marked inclusion of this content in their social interaction.

The study, conducted in six schools in the north-west of England, is notable for underlining the cultural role of advertising as a source of news in the conversations; a discussion of 'jingles', counting and memorization of advertisements, among other findings. Another finding is that the discussion of advertisements facilitates and strengthens interpersonal and inter-group relationships within the reference group, and that lack of knowledge of advertisements isolates semantically from the group.

By accepting advertising as a basic form of social interaction, young people use their content independently of the advertised product or service. The absence of references to the consumed product is an important finding in that it confirms empirically that advertising is consumed beyond the product itself. This gives the concept of advertising a more complex status: that of a cultural product that confers personal

and group meanings through experience, interpretation, metaphor and ritual.

The latter study set out to identify the social uses of advertising on 20- to 25-year-old youths who have lived immersed in a media culture. Its central aim was to identify the meanings attached to advertising beyond the consumption of the product, especially important if we consider that advertising is one of the most pervasive features of contemporary culture. In brief, advertising plays a role in social cohesion by providing consumers with shared themes, with topics that facilitate conversation between young people in their own contexts in which, in order to participate, knowledge of different advertising themes is essential.

This explains why a major social use of advertising is the inclusion of television campaign slogans in every-

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day speech. The hypothesis that the study tested to explain this fact was that in previous decades the presence of advertising in media was significantly less than it is today, and thus the impact and recall may have been greater than at present.

3. Methodology

The test sample consisted of 15- to 24-year-old youths living in Santiago who belonged to high (ABC1) and low (D) socioeconomic groups according to the social stratification map of Chile². These two groups were chosen for their coherence with the objectives of the study in terms of making ensuring the sociocultural heterogeneity of the youth sample. The use of both groups helps to discern and identify two distinct poles, thus aiding the identification of significant differences between the two realities³.

Group members were separated according to sex, age and socioeconomic status in order to facilitate the composition and functioning of the groups. The age

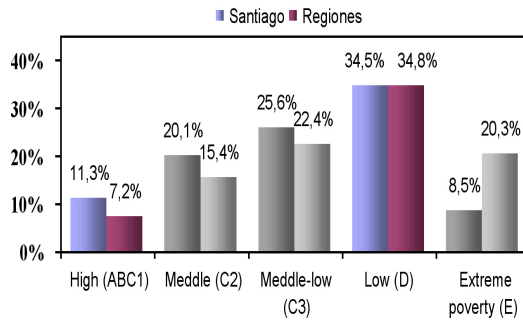


Figure 1: Percentage of households according to socioeconomic status. Source: Adimark, Socioeconomic map of Chile, 2004.

variable was divided into two age subgroups (16- to 18-year-olds and 20- to 23-year-olds). The final group composition, according to the criteria described above.

Group moderators were supplied with an archive of commercials selected according to media visibility criteria expressed in GRPs (Gross Rating Point) so as to stimulate group discussion and ensure awareness and familiarity with messages.

4. Findings

4.1. Use of time and mass media outlets

In this aspect of the analysis we find that time is mainly spent on sports, computer use, Internet use and in television viewing. Internet time is spent in Fotolog, Facebook, chat and Youtube. A breakdown of the uses of leisure time along socioeconomic lines shows consumption of free-to-air television primarily in the lower-income group, both in the 16- to 18-year-old range as in the 20- to 23-year-old range. Use of leisure time in higher-income under-18-year-olds is dedicated for the most part to school sports activities and computer use at home.

The latter consists primarily of access to chat and social networks such as Facebook and Fotolog. Leisure time in over-18-year-olds is allocated to sports, interpersonal relationships and computer use, with primary access to Facebook and Youtube.

Television consumption is more diverse when compared to competing media, and, along with the Internet, is one of the highest consumption mediums on offer. In higher-income under-18-year-olds the

Group	Age	Socioeconomic status
Group 1	16-18	High
Group 2	16-18	Low
Group 3	20-23	High
Group 4	20-23	Low

Table 1: Composition of focus groups.

focus is on free-to-air television series, with newscasts highly valued. In the case of pay-tv the focus is on consumption of feature films and reportage. With respect to the Internet, we perceive its high value as a communications platform. Its use is focused on Messenger, Facebook and as an aid for school assignments. In the case of radio the primary use is in music consumption, which causes advertising to be perceived in this medium as a disruptive element in the midst of the expected programming.

In the case of higher-income over-20-year-olds there is a more segmented appropriation with respect to media consumption and its contents. Television consumption is divided between series offered by pay-tv, and soap operas on free-to-view television. It is worth noting that consumption takes on a multimedia character when there is television and Internet use in parallel. Internet media consumption centers on music downloading and radio listening, allowing the consumer to bypass advertising slots.

Regarding other media, consumption of newspapers in higher-income under-18-year-olds centers on sports and cultural supplements. In those over the age of 20, newspaper consumption is primarily for news as a complement to the use of Internet information hubs. It is important to note that newspaper reading in this group is mainly in printed format due to the distribution of this medium to the home through daily subscriptions.

Free-to-air television consumption in the lower-income group centers on national fiction programs, which are largely taken at face value. The evidence is clear in the case of under-18-year-olds who assign historical value to certain fictional programs that re-enact past eras of the history of Chile. Internet usage centers on social networks such as Facebook and Fotolog and communication hubs such as Terra for news and sports. Lastly, radio consumption is varied and consists of music and talk shows.

In lower-income youths over the age of 20, television takes up the greater part of leisure time, with consumption centered on variety programs. Internet use is dedicated to Fotolog, Messenger and music downloading. Newspaper consumption is significantly lower than that of the upper-income group; free newspapers such as those distributed in the Santiago Metro are mentioned.

None of the lower-income homes participating in the study buy newspapers on a daily basis. Thus, when a newspaper is read, it is due to having gained access to it through a third party, and centers mainly on headlines and specific supplements such as sports.

4.2. Consumption and assessment of advertising

We note, first, a deep knowledge about the various forms of advertising, associated primarily to the knowledge of particular products, incorporated into the topics of conversation with peers. In the case of the lower-income socioeconomic group, women use advertising for the most part as a means to obtaining information about offers and end-of-season sales, which speaks to the high credibility of advertising content from the point of view of its commercial information. Nevertheless, the informative and commercial aspects of advertising do not detract from its persuasive power.

This commercial rationale is also present in lower-income under-18-year-old minors, where one of the main benefits associated with advertising is its ability to inform of discounts and offers. The former contrasts starkly with the situation in the higher-income groups, where, although there is no identification with given advertisements, its value is aesthetic, associated mainly to television ads and graphic pieces displayed in magazines and on public roads.

Another interesting aspect to highlight in the lower-income group, which contrasts with the higher income group, is the strong preference for television advertising. This owes to its higher ability to attract attention through its engaging of more senses in the reception of associated messages, both with respect to quantity of information as to the aesthetic aspects involved in an audiovisual storytelling format. Thus, television advertising offers greater possibilities, through its messages, to engage and connect with the emotions of youths.

In the case of higher-income groups there is a search for, and appreciation of, targeted advertising according to their own interests. This explains why specific information relating to the product is searched for directly on its web page, restricting traditional media advertising to its connection with reality, events that can effectively take place, with its emotions and values. The connection of advertising with daily life is evident in how they incorporate certain advertisements in daily conversation. It is mainly through its humorous aspect that quotes are appropriated while interacting with their peers, and in certain modes of behavior proposed by advertising. This incorporation is also observed in the validation of advertising in the selection of clothes and incorporation of new fashions in the wardrobe. The appropriation of advertising elements, however, is realized through a re-signification and application of a particular point of view, which implies a valorization of their own originality.

In short, the uses of advertising are associated, on the one hand, with aspects tied to marketing per se, dominated by a critical stance towards the message; and on the other hand, to scenes of daily life, where its approach is affective in nature, incorporating its contents in the socialization process. Finally, advertising presents itself as a cultural and commercial standard, fully validated as an information medium, and this implies an important strength as a platform for the exchange of symbolic goods.

5. Discussion

We note, first, the perception among young people of advertising as an integral part of the media landscape, both in its commercial and cultural aspects.

The implication here is that there is a validation of publicity in contemporary culture, and of its use as a tool for socialization. This aspect is of particular relevance to advertising studies conducted in Chile, as they have tended to focus on the consumer as an individual, decontextualized from their social interaction.

The relationship to advertising observed among youths shows a high degree of awareness regarding the content of commercials, and of the market alternatives on offer with respect to consumer goods. This implies that publicity, although not recognized explicitly, is an item of interest among young people. It's interesting to note, in this case, that although the act of buying is said to have no relation to what is communicated by publicity, it does indeed play an informative role in the case of prices for the lower-income group, and as tool of aesthetic-cultural information in the higher-income group.

This view is reinforced by the fact that youth discourse makes use of advertising as a tool of commercial information and socializing of new fashions. Thus, advertising is presented as an aesthetic experience within higher-income groups, its primary values being its use of creativity, persuasive value and 'insight'. In the lower-income group the value of advertising is inverted, its role that of information of prices and offers. These differences account for the divergent buying motives of young people, with peculiar combinations of aesthetic, emotional and economy-driven motives within a given discourse.

It's also worth pointing out how both groups make use of advertising contents in conversation, and the repertoire of phrases used amongst themselves. This appropriation can be considered an important aspect of socialization, allowing them to participate in the conversations and codes of their own reference group, thus avoiding possible marginalization from the group.

As Ritson & Elliott (1999) point out, advertising provides a repertoire of experiences to the youth of this study, aiding in representation and self-discovery with respect to the outer world.

Lastly, advertising in Chile is normally targeted at very general character stereotypes, thus failing to produce appropriation and direct identification with youths. It is revealing how little attention these mechanisms of appropriation and social uses of advertising have received from advertising investigation, ignoring that these very mechanisms, through the incorporation of everyday youth language, may significantly lengthen the life of a campaign. This calls for a re-evaluation of advertising as an object of study of social psychology, from which it has been relegated traditionally due to its commercial aspect, if its central role in contemporary culture is to be assessed.

Notes

¹ From the study «Significaciones y valoraciones de la publicidad en los jóvenes de estrato socioeconómico alto y bajo del Gran Santiago (Signification and value of advertising in youth of high and low socioeconomic status of metropolitan Santiago), conducted between 2008 and 2009.

² The current socio-economic map of Santiago is structured in the following terms: upper-income(ABC1): 11.3%, middle-income (C2): 20.1%, lower-middle-income (C3): 25.6%, lower-income (D): 34.5% and extreme poverty (E): 8.5%

³ In general, advertising market analyses exclude group E (extreme poverty, representing 8.5% of households in Greater Santiago), as in the case of audience surveys conducted by market research firm Time Ibope with the audience-measurement instrument People Meter, which does not consider this group in its results. This results in very little information on the cultural consumer habits of this group, making it difficult to include in this study. For this reason we have chosen group D.

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