

## THE UNETHICAL (SUBLIMINAL) ADVERTISING

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The unethical advertising does not necessarily have to be forbidden. Sometimes a thing arousing common objection is not prohibited. The thing forbidden may only be something synonymously codified. The unethical advertisement which affects one's subconsciousness, constitutes an interesting instance. It was and has been of interest not only of scientists but also various impostors. Sigmund Freud was the one who proved that subconsciousness plays an enormous role in human's life and may govern one's acting without the consciousness taking part. There is nothing more tempting for advertising specialists, then and as a result, majority of countries forbids this kind of activity.<sup>1</sup> In Poland as well, in "The Law Concerning Combating the Unfair Competition" (1993), such practices were prohibited. In the art. 3, law 1 it is said that *by the unfair competition we understand acting against the law or against good custom if it establishes a threat or violates other contractor's or client's business*. In the art. 16, law 1, point 4, one may read that such a deed in the advertising domain stands for the *utterance, which by encouraging to purchase or to make use of particular*

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<sup>1</sup> Nierenberg, B., *Wybrane problemy badania skuteczności reklamy*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole, 2000, p. 68.

service makes an impression of a neutral information. In particular, we mean here the so-called *hidden advertisement* or *cryptoadvertisement*. For many years the Polish legislator had not perceived it as necessary to refer to the subconscious or unethical (subliminal) advertisement.

As the matter of fact, what is this advertisement affecting our subconsciousness? The answer to this question is not that easy. The fact that everyone “knows” that something exists does not necessarily mean that it really does. In the literature of subject matter, there is a case from 1957<sup>2</sup> described in Fort Lee (The United States), during the projection of a movie chronicle, every 5 seconds on eight film strips (1/3 of a second) there appeared an inscription: *Drink Coca Cola together with: Hungry? Eat Pop Corn.*<sup>3</sup>

The commissioner of this experiment, a certain James Vicary claimed that the sale of pop corn increased half of its amount, and Coca Cola – up to 18 per cent.<sup>4</sup> The whole incident was later described by *The New Yorker*. Later on, V. Packard, on the basis of this event, wrote the book *Hidden Persuasion* which described the ghostlike orwellian world where the society of future is submitted to the overwhelming media manipulation. The specialists reacted differently to these “revelations”. Some people claimed that these were incidental activities; others, that omnipresent. Wilson Bryan Key, the author of *Subliminal Seduction* belonged to the second group. In his book Key described cases of printed advertisement which included, in hidden way, male or female genitalia.<sup>5</sup> Due to his theories Key lost his post of a university professor but at the same time he became wealthy because his books sold very well.

Dariusz Doliński describes an experiment carried out by Champion and Turner at the end of the Eighties. They were to project a thirty-minute movie. In the course of this movie, every 10 seconds (exactly for one hundredth of a seconds) one group of examined people was shown a spoon of boiled rice with a sign “fabulous rice”. The second examined group watched the same

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<sup>2</sup> Curyło, C., “Mieszanie w podświadomości. Co to jest reklama podprogowa”, *Aktualności Telewizyjne* 1996, nr 6, pp. 84–88.

<sup>3</sup> Doliński, D., *Psychologiczne mechanizmy reklamy*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2003, s. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Sutherland, M., Sylvester, A., *Reklama a umysł konsumenta*, Wydawnictwo PWN, Warszawa 2003, pp. 39–40.

movie, differing only in the fact that every 10 seconds they were shown an insignificant tangle of lines.<sup>6</sup> After the projection the participants who were shown a picture of a spoonful of rice and they were asked whether they had ever seen it. The second question concerned whether, according to the examined, the rice was called royal or rather fabulous.<sup>7</sup> In both cases the experimentators did not notice any dependences and reached the conclusion that the unethical advertisement does not exist. If the description of Doliński is reliable, and there is no reason for it not to be so, then, Champion and Turner should be perceived as liars. Why is this so? It is due to the fact that the physical capability of an exposition of a particular picture during the projection of a movie to last 0.01s does not exist. Right from the beginning, when the moving picture was invented, the speed of a film band amounts to 24 film leaders a second. As a result, one may substitute one film leader with, at most, one another and the time of its exposition will amount to 0.24s. In this respect, it will be 24 times longer from the one, which according to Champion and Turner was shown to the participants of the experiment.

Max Sutherland and Alice Sylvester devoted the whole chapter of their book *Advertisement and The Consumer's Mind* to the matters concerning the unethical advertisement and they overthrew and derided the followers of it. According to this couple, such an advertisement was a myth. At the same time, however, they were wondering why this kind of myth was so vital, and provided the answer themselves: "Perhaps the reason is the fact that there were laws introduced, which forbade the use of this kind of advertisements. Enacting these laws, the inexorable convictions concerning the unethical advertisement were confirmed."<sup>8</sup>

However, it turned out to be precisely inverse. The temperance of legislators from many countries to forbid the unethical advertisement came from the fact that introduction of the prohibition of its appliance could be treated by many as a proof of its existence. Furthermore, it would be necessary to provide not only the definition of the unethical advertisement but also, to seriously start looking for it. For many years, among the countries of the European Union, it is solely Spain which, *sensu stricto*, forbids the unethical

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<sup>6</sup> Doliński, D., *Psychologiczne mechanizmy reklamy...*, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

advertisement. As understood by the Spanish legislation such an advertisement stands for “applying all existing means which, exceeding the perceived unethical or in a similar way, using technical means, may affect the receiver in a way which excludes conscious perception”<sup>9</sup>

The opponents of the unethical advertisement put forward two strong arguments: 1. the unethical advertisement works below the consciousness level, but if below the level of consciousness, then it means that it does not work; 2. they state that just as Sutherland and Sylvester “There are no proofs that messages received with little contribution may directly affect our conscious choice (or even direct it) thanks to gaining the status of *superiority* in the face of consciously received messages”<sup>10</sup>

The first argument is of tautological origin. It means that if something exists, it exists and if something does not exist, then in the same respect, it does not. Such an argument is impossible to dispute with because its followers assume that *a priori*, that something above the threshold works, whereas something below, does not. If it was so, one would have to reject the attainments of Freud and his followers. As far as the second matter is concerned, it appears that Sutherland and Sylvester gave the answer to the question in their book themselves. As they write: “Advertisement received with shallow transformation, is not only not universal but, more probably, ineffective and almost surely, works less effectively than advertisement which involves us on the highest level of consciousness.”<sup>11</sup>

It emerges that the authors have reached the blind alley because, on one hand they write that unethical advertisement is a myth, whilst on the other, that even if it is a myth, it works weaker than the messages transformed on higher levels. However, it is not about whether a particular advertisement operates more or less effectively; it is about the fact that thanks to such an advertisement, is possible to smuggle some contents which would not be acceptable in the so-called official advertisement. Let us come back to the experiments connected with proving whether the unethical commercial exists or not.

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<sup>9</sup> Curyło, C., *Mieszanie w podświadomości. Co to jest reklama podprogowa...*, pp. 84–88.

<sup>10</sup> Sutherland, M., Sylvester, A., *Reklama a umysł konsumenta...*, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

When, at the beginning of the Seventies, one of the American advertising agencies repeated, in research purposes, the experiment from Firt Lee, it turned out that it did not have any influence on the size of the sale. At that time, the author of the experiment, James Vicary confessed he had fabricated data for commercial purposes. So everything seems to be clear now and we don't have to think of the unethical advertisement anymore. Oh, no! The unethical advertisement works very well. It seems to be proved by Robert Zajac, an American scientist, who in 1993, together with his PhD student conducted an interesting experiment<sup>12</sup>

The person examined was seated in front of TV screen on which, every few minutes, there appeared a Chinese sign. Later on the person was asked if he/she associated a particular ideogram with both pleasant or unpleasant things. The person examined did not in fact know, that just before the given sign was shown, there was someone's face appearing for a short moment. Once it was a happy, laughing face, the other time the face was gloomy, with a grimace. The result of the experiment was very symptomatic. Nearly always, when the face appearing was happy, the following sign evoked positive associations. The gloomy face caused that the Chinese ideogram resulted in definitely negative reactions.<sup>13</sup>

It is crucial then, to pose a question why Zajac managed to prove the effectiveness of unethical commercial, and Vince did not? As the matter of fact, the psychological research prove that the information of psychological character (e.g. a smiling face) works even if shown rarely and for a short time. Conversely, the information of perceptive faculty (e.g. the name of some product) must be presented on the screen more frequently and for a longer period of time in order to exert any influence on the viewer. After the experiment of Robert Zajac, it seems that doubts concerning the unethical commercial have been dispelled and that they are not imagined by impostors or science fiction writers. All in all, the unethical advertisement works, but is it used?

It is the year 2000. In the United States we have the presidential election campaign. George W. Bush comes to fight with Al Gore. It is more than

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<sup>12</sup> Doliński, D., *Psychologia reklamy*, Agencja Reklamowa „Aida”, Wrocław 2001, p. 33–34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

obvious that it is going to be the campaign over the TV which will evolve the winner. At that point Gore's staff discovers that the Republicans, in their election spots, just between the two photographs of the Democratic candidate, for the fraction of a second sticks into the word "rats",<sup>14</sup> Gore's staff informed the consigner CNN. The incriminated commercial spot disappeared from TV screens. Bush stated "It must have been a coincidence that the word rats appeared on the screen". Perhaps a coincidence, but it was Bush who was elected president.

Making use of the subliminal advertisement is generally difficult to prove, it requires, step by step, poring over commercial spots, but not only this. The fact that unethical advertisement works weaker than the so-called classical one is of no importance because every advertisement starts working if it is multiplied an adequate number of times.

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<sup>14</sup> Bullock, A., *Reklama podprogowa*, Wydawnictwo Helion, Gliwice 2008, pp. 137–138.