



## MIRROR NEURONS IN STORYTELLING OR ABOUT THE DEPTH OF PROCESSING IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

The post-modern world of communication, which has already diverse elements and has already grown accustomed to various phenomena, confronts the consumers with stories, and not, as hitherto, with a uniform and one-dimensional informative advertising message. The recipients are challenged to accept the interpretation of hidden meaning and to confront with intertextuality. The consumer has to face the interpretation of the references to various images, meanings, myths and archetypes. The stories on the brand delve into numerous myths and archetypes; they use symbols and images rich in meaning. This trend also has its neurocommunicative explanation. Achievements of neuroscience have shown how important it is to include research of cognitive scientists, in particular the discovery of mirror neurons, in the work on improving marketing messages and strategies. The recipients of advertising want to experience certain values, not just an empty message. They wish to see the brand, not the product itself. This change of perception can be attributed to a certain over-stimulation of the contemporary message recipients.

This article will present theories about the phenomenon of encoding and decoding the encrypted media message. Important for this will be such concepts as myth, archetype, symbol, image and monomyth. In addition, key for the chosen topic is the importance of mirror neurons, the development of which contributed significantly to shaping human consciousness and society. One of their most important functions is to recognise moods, feelings and thoughts of others, which is a key step in the processing of marketing communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

The most important goal of advertising is to be etched in the memory. Marketing experts are adamant in their belief that this would only be possible by virtue of employing repetition of visual identification marks and the product name (Tyszka, 2004). Currently, another tendency is becoming increasingly apparent in advertising, according to which the logo nor the slogan is permanently ingrained in the consciousness of the consumer. The centre of gravity lies with the narrative element that contributes to the growth of the interest in the brand. Complex narratives used in the advertising message create excitement and generate consumer demand, thereby making her or him dependant on the product. The post-modern world of communication, which has already diverse elements and has already grown accustomed to various phenomena, confronts the consumers with stories, and not, as hitherto, with a uniform and one-dimensional informative advertising message. The recipients are challenged to accept the interpretation of hidden meaning and to confront with intertextuality. The consumer has to face the interpretation of the references to various images, meanings, myths and archetypes.

As part of the recent trend prevailing in the advertising communication, the recipient is immersed in a world of symbols wherein meanings and the string of possible interpretations enforce the need for a continuous process of decrypting the camouflaged content and the hidden meaning. Advertisers part with merely advertising messages and obvious, easily verified, persuasion techniques, because message recipients have managed to get used to this type of advertisements, and consequently became indifferent to the stimuli provided by this kind of marketing message. This is why the stories on the brand delve into numerous myths and archetypes; they use symbols and images rich in meaning. This trend also has its neurocommunicative explanation. Achievements of neuroscience have shown how important it is to include research of cognitive scientists, in particular the discovery of mirror neurons, in the work on improving marketing messages and strategies. The recipients of advertising want to experience certain values, not just an empty message. They wish to see the brand, not the product itself. This change of perception can be attributed to a certain over-stimulation of the contemporary message recipients. The narratives in advertising engage the recipients and force them to decode the hidden information, to extract the meanings submerged in a narrated story. Well-told stories speak effectively to recipients of the message successfully finding its way to mirror neurons of potential consumers.

In the post-modern age marketing, particular brands function as phenomena that must be seen in isolation from the products signed by a given company. The brand transfers into the realm of concepts permeating the area of culture, as mentioned in the book on storytelling by Grzegorz Kosson (2014). The marketing message ceases to function in the quantitative, qualitative or purely informative sphere. It separates itself from the obvious instruments of persuasion and rejects the tools forming creative message. Advertisements do not focus on the hard and tangible characteristics of the products, but become the carriers of meanings, senses and told stories. Modern epic style of advertising message is based on the fact that the images are a part of the collective subconscious.

This article will present theories about the phenomenon of encoding and decoding the encrypted media message. Important for this will be such concepts as myth, archetype, symbol, image and monomyth. In addition, key for the chosen topic is the importance of mirror neurons, the development of which contributed significantly to shaping human consciousness and society. One of their most important functions is to recognise moods, feelings and thoughts of others, which is a key step in the processing of marketing communication.

#### SIGNIFICANT AND MARKED. THE ESSENCE OF THE MARK

Roland Barthes drew a theory of myths, the presence of which in everyday life is unquestionable. Narrative advertising must include elements like an archetype, a symbol, a myth, an image or a metaphor. Otherwise, the advertising message will not be effective. According to the scholar, the narratives have triumphantly entered marketing communication to restore the blood and pulse to advertising, as the only tales that possess the potential to imprint in the recipient's memory (Barthes, 1970). Barthes himself in his academic work relies on the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure who refers to the communicative understanding of the mark, which combines a concept and an acoustic image. Thus, a linguistic sign connects not an object and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image. The latter is not the material, and purely physical sound, but a mental reflection of sound, an image that provides a sensual testimony about it. A word treated as a character dual in its nature, resulting from the junction of two components. Both of these components contained in a linguistic sign are therefore of psychological nature and are connected by a bond of association.

Relying on the Ferdinand de Saussure's sign theory, Roland Barthes allowed the possibility of studying extra-linguistic cultural areas, such as iconic signs, thus successfully transferring the method used in linguistics to the realm of the image. In his later works Barthes indicated that the characters did not have a stable denotive meaning, but were polysemous. Therefore, these particular characters are carrying a lot of potential meanings and can be interpreted in many different ways. An important element of Barthes' theory is a fact proclaiming that the production of meanings requires the active participation of the recipient of a given message and the engagement of his or her cultural competence. Barthes points out that it is the recipient of the text model who creates its significance, as it is an interactive process. Furthermore, the interpretation of the text largely depends on the knowledge and the repertoire of cultural and social codes the recipient possesses.

#### THE POWER OF MYTH. THE MIGHT OF ARCHETYPE. THE COHERENCE OF MONOMYTH

Another imperative element of epic marketing messages is the myth. Bronisław Malinowski (1990), a social and economic anthropologist who researched the Trobriand Islands culture, compared a mythical image to a narrative, which resurrects an ancient reality. Furthermore, he proved that a myth is narrated to satisfy deep religious needs and moral aspirations. On the other hand, Roland Barthes

(2000) defines myth as a word, a language, a mode of communication, thus emphasising its formal and instrumental definition. By becoming a word by scooping significance for the community, each concept or object can become a myth. In order to understand a myth it is important to define its intention, i.e. a set of meanings and connotations associated with it and contained in a given form, an image, which is a carrier of content. A myth exists because of the reception of intent given to it by the creator or sender of myth. According to Barthes, a myth is a kind of stereotype, a collection of associations, with which a person thinks and which a person uses to justify all that is not warranted from the empirical perspective. These two modes of perceiving the myth outline two main directions of the scientific approach concerning it. The former binds the myth to the type of primitive society, an archaic or a preliterate one. The latter joins the myth with the universal forms of thinking, manifested in various societies.

Surely, the marketing message is nourished by the second kind of myth. Communication in advertising, where a narrative is the core, is focused on myths, symbols and monomyths. It relies on stories with a clearly defined scheme that exhibit replication of fixed types of characters, i.e. on archetypes among which Carl Gustav Jung defined certain reappearing universal forms of mental experiences (Jung, 2012). These forms are common to all humans as psychological equivalents of instincts. They are passed from generation to generation as patterns of behaviour, feeling and thinking. Jung named them archetypes, which in analytical psychology represent the deep layer of psyche or the collective unconscious. Archetypes can be compared to preimages that hold basic psychological significance of *collective dominants*. The archetypes are rooted in an individual's psyche binding the whole of his or her symbolic existence. They influence an individual's behaviour, beliefs, ideologies and ways of thinking. The outcomes of archetypes are defined as the effects of psychological necessity. That is why ideologies and religions have such a significant impact on the human psyche. Using their power, archetypes augment the importance of perceived content. That is why advertising narratives bear such great power of impact. As they employ archetypal images, they efficiently reach the collective unconscious, which has developed mechanisms to connect the image with the content, labelled with meaning. Through the contact with the archetype used in marketing communication the psyche allows for the access of all that is common to all humanity. The symbols activate some associations, feelings and inner experiences of an individual. A symbol commands the structure of thought, influences its intensity and stimulates the process of decoding the information effectively enough so that the information contained in the marketing message remains in the mind of the consumer on permanent basis.

Jung's theory of archetypes was employed by Joseph Campbell, an explorer of world mythologies, who discovered that most of the myths from around the world repeat the same themes and the same sequence of events (Campbell, 1997). This groundbreaking proposition is going to be of great importance in the context of the use of archetypes in advertising narratives. Campbell called this phenomenon a monomyth or a single myth. The scholar dealt with the phenomenon of monomyth in his book titled *Hero of a Thousand Faces*, in which he described a typical hero's journey repeated for thousands of years in myths from around the world. The hero of the monomyth is usually a warrior or a knight, endowed with strength and courage. It can also be a traveller, a conqueror, a builder of civilizations, a philosopher, a scientist or an artist. The road, or rather the journey that he has to travel

is essentially the same for all types of said hero. During the trip, the hero is transformed. The sense of need commands him to depart and start his quest; its completion and reaching the destination changes both the hero and his surroundings. In the course of this mythical journey, the help becomes important. Every hero meets a wise teacher or an assistant, thanks to whom he achieves wisdom and magical powers. The journey itself has many stages, separated by thresholds; each of them has a guard that the hero has to defeat. The hero is put to a number of trials, such as slaying the dragon, gaining treasure or rescuing the princess. The final and the most important challenge that the hero has to pass is the encounter with death. This test invariably requires from the hero the ability to follow his heart and the knowledge that comes from intuition or superhuman power.

Campbell's monomyth theory shares many features with Jung's archetypal images. Undeniably, archetypes, myths or monomyths constitute the cornerstones of any narrative, while maintaining the consistency of the story. In addition, they become a key necessary for decoding or analysing the story. Without them, the tales would be indecipherable. In other words, building a lucid story would not be possible.

## THE ADVERTISING MESSAGE AS SEEN IN THE FRAMEWORK OF COMMERCIAL SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is a branch of science dealing with the study of signs and symbols. Its founding fathers are a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Charles S. Peirce, an American philosopher, each of whom pioneered the science of signs. Semiotics has played a significant role in linguistics and cultural anthropology. The first to apply it to marketing was Roland Barthes, who used it for Renault. Virginia Valentine from Great Britain focused on practical application of semiotics. In the 1980s the scholar initiated the British school of semiotics and within twenty years, semiotics became an important tool supporting marketing decisions. The discipline is based on three elements, namely signs, code and culture. The signs function as man-made signals that are received through the senses, whereas culture is a system of rules, principles and patterns that reveal themselves in everyday consumer behaviour. Culture can be studied using the techniques of observation and analysis of cultural content, such as stories, fairy tales, gossip, television series, commercials and magazines. The semiotic analysis assumes that the hidden meanings contained in the marketing communication are rooted in culture. These hidden meanings create the world and the reality in which the recipient of the marketing message is immersed.

Commercial semiotics recurses to the interpretation of the text and draws attention to its context, discourse and meaning. It examines the commercial message within the framework of myth, symbol, sign and cultural code. The key assumptions of commercial semiotics refer to the belief that consumers' behaviour, choices and decisions are programmed by the culture in which they function. Commercial semiotics provides an explanation of the signs in the consumer's culture, about their creation, functioning and distribution.<sup>1</sup> Based on the myth, semiotics refers

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<sup>1</sup> The first ones, who used this knowledge to create a unique research methodology for the needs of the market was a British company *Semiotic Solutions* headed by Virginia Valentine and Monty Alexander.

to the Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory and his research on the myth in totemic communities.<sup>2</sup> In analysing myths and their structure, the anthropologist came to the conclusion that the strength and vitality of a myth is related to how it solves a certain significant cultural contradiction. According to Levi-Strauss, the goal of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming the contradictions (Lévi-Strauss, 2011). The scholar noted that the primary relationship in a myth is that of juxtaposed binary oppositions: good-evil, human-animal, heaven-earth or lie-truth. This need for ordering the world, which is a natural part of human culture, is called the *notness principle* according to which the actual cognitive process that gives meaning and significance to objects is understanding what something is not rather than what it is. The concept of goodness is realised only when based on the awareness of what evil is. Life is not death, sin is not holiness and dirt is not cleanliness. Every culture or sub-culture produces various sets of binary oppositions characteristic to itself. They play a vital role in the socialisation and bonding the members of a given cultural group.

In ancient and primitive communities, those binary pairs of opposition were unmistakably revealed in myths and stories passed orally from generation to generation. In contemporary society, they became the function of the mass media. Series, movies, entertainment, glossy magazines, books, advertising, packaging, and even shop interiors are a source of continuous communication that reveals sets of cultural oppositions essential for the community.

## STORYTELLING OR THE POWER OF NARRATION

In her article on storytelling Monika Hajdas (2011) proves that the age of science--oriented minds' domination is gone for good, and the future belongs to a different kind of people altogether, with a different mindset, creative and filled with empathy, namely the right-hemisphere thinkers. Storytelling in the marketing message allows for conveying large amounts of information unnoticed. On the other hand, this kind of communication evokes emotions in the target group and energises the recipients. Within the framework of the aforementioned discoveries by Jung, Barthes or Campbell, storytelling is nothing new. After all, every story is made up of images, symbols and myths that are subject to a process of decoding by the recipients. The analysis of the references to tradition and cultural motifs or to myths and archetypes should make us keep in mind that the prevailing fact that the development of master story messages or moral, is based on universal truths supporting certain immutable values. Apart from this, an element of conflict is a paramount one; it serves as a driving force of a story. The characters are equally important, and the glue of the story is a myth or an image, some meaning carrier

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<sup>2</sup> The totemic myths talk mainly about the kinship between humans and animals, about an extraordinary event which proves that, for example, one of the clans of the Zuni tribe is related to wolves. This story causes that the primary contradiction between nature and culture is symbolically terminated. The human-wolf symbolising totem is part of both nature and culture. In the modern world, the function of the totem can be taken by the *Harley-Davidson* brand, which, like the totem, belongs to both orders. On the one hand, it is the creation of technological excellence of the associated civilization, on the other hand, it offers authenticity and freedom of being in nature. All this is reflected in the brand communication, both in visual and verbal sphere. The strength of the *Harley-Davidson* brand continues to grow. One of the important reasons may be the fact that the opposition between nature and civilization is becoming stronger in contemporary culture.

that makes a story consistent. A well-constructed story is memorable; it activates not only peripheral awareness, but also the cognitive perception.

Klaus Fog claims that the stories in the advertising messages humanise the brand, the sender and, to certain extent, the recipient (Fog, Budtz, Munch, Blanchette, 2011). A story can be told in numerous ways. Brands build their image by telling stories about their origins. The epic style of the advertising message is also the consequence of recalling the person of the founder or the creator of the advertised enterprise or artefact as a unique personality who can remain in the memory of the recipient. The narratives in advertising frequently contain stories of the protagonist discovering the sense of existence and finding the answer to the questions of who he or she is and why he or she is at that particular place in life. The narratives often show the transformation of their protagonist, the fight against adversities and the victory. They present the mission of the company as well as its founder.

## MENTALISATION IN THE MARKETING MESSAGE OR HOW THE MIRROR NEURONS WORK

The narratives are of transhistorical and transcultural nature, and therefore, according to representatives of neuroscience, human brains are made for storytelling and story-listening. These stories should, however, be characterised by easy to assimilate and remember, but also standard for most cultures, structure. Narratives, therefore, have the power to engage consumers by allowing them during the reception of the story to engage senses, areas of the brain responsible, for example, for movement. Studies show that during the assimilation of information that has not been included in the narrative structure, only two areas of the brain are active, i.e. the Broca's area and the Wernicke's area (Vetulani, 2014). These areas are responsible for language processing. This fact is of great importance for the depth of information processing. During processing of only dry facts the human brain gets involved to extract the meaning of a set of words forming sentences. It is different in the case of processing the narrative. In the course of communication, with the help of a story, certain areas in the brains become active that would be active if the communicating person actually experienced events presented in the story. All this is possible thanks to the presence of mirror neurons in the brains (Vetulani, 2014) that build a particular arrangement of neurons. This arrangement plays out the motor program encoding the observed actions gently stimulating the appropriate neurons. However, they do not cause any real movement in the observer. Christian Keyser (2011) places the mirror neurons in specific brain areas which are involved when we perform certain actions or have certain emotions or sensations. Interestingly, these areas are also recruited when we simply observe someone else performing similar actions, having similar sensations or having similar emotions. These areas called 'shared circuits' transform what we see into what we would have done or felt in the same situation. With such brain areas, understanding other people is not an effort of explicit thought, but becomes an intuitive sharing of their emotions, sensations and actions. This group of nerve cells was discovered in the early 1990s at the Università degli Studi di Parma in Italy by Giacomo Rizzolatti,

Leonardo Fogassi and Vittorio Gallese. In practice, the discovery by Giacomo Rizzolatti explains why, when the recipient of the oral, written or audiovisual message receives information about a running hero, the brain of the message recipient activates the area responsible for movement. Neurosciences precisely by reference to the mirror neurons explain the deep processing of the message taking into account the narrative. Nevertheless, already Carl Gustav Jung was aware of the importance of narrative in the life of the individual and the social group. According to Jung (2011), the stories drive the man, allow to experience, identify, sense and feel. At the core of effective communication should be a narrative focused on myths, symbols and monomyths. Successful communication guaranteeing deep processing refers to stories with a clearly defined scheme that exhibit replication of fixed types of characters, i.e. on archetypes among which Carl Gustav Jung defined certain reappearing universal forms of mental experiences (Jung, 2011).

A coherent and convincing story has many advantages. Storytelling distinguishes the brand, giving it an individual image, by which products gain a permanent and invisible competitive advantage. Creating stories explains the existence of the brand, outlines its purpose and mission. Thanks to the narrative, the brand becomes multi-dimensional in the advertising message. The recipients of the message do not focus on the product itself, but are looking for something more, a unique and individual story, which will stimulate the circuits and activate mirror neurons in the brain.

## CONCLUSIONS

Narration in the advertising message is by no means a modern invention. This type of communication is derived from Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs. Jung's theory of archetypes, Campbell's model of monomyth and Barthes' concept of the symbol and meaning together with his theory of the marketing message imperative to be based on a narrative in order to invent a story, because only a story has the potential of being imprinted in memory. Stories in advertising messages fight against the indifference of the recipients. To correctly decipher the content encrypted in the image, the symbol or reference to a myth, the consumer must engage intellectually with the substance of the message. That kind of approach to marketing communication ensures a permanent contact with the conveyed information that is memorised and germinates in the recesses of the mind, thus generating the need for ownership.

Taking into account the achievements of neurosciences and existing knowledge affecting the depth of processing, the fact concerning the communication of the human species should be highlighted. Not without reason people use messages of a characteristic and reproducible construction. Through stories, applying the relevant structures and reaching for the images, in its uniquely decodable semantic structure, an efficient exchange of information can be guaranteed that takes place in basically unnoticed manner, so that the interlocutors acquire new, permanent knowledge on a specific topic in an unaware and implicit way. Apart from the characteristic construction of communication it is emotions that evoke narratives in a group of recipients in an energising way to the appropriate areas of the brain responsible for processing information. Within the framework of the aforementioned

observations by Jung, Barthes or Campbell, storytelling is nothing new. After all, every story is made up of images, symbols and myths that are subject to a process of decoding by the recipients. The analysis of the references to tradition and cultural motifs or to myths and archetypes should make us keep in mind that the prevailing fact that the development of master story messages or moral is based on universal truths supporting certain immutable values. Apart from this, an element of conflict is a paramount one; it serves as a driving force of a story. The characters are equally important, and the glue of the story is a myth or an image, some meaning carrier that makes a story consistent. A well-constructed story is memorable; it activates not only peripheral awareness, which is emphasised by the currently thriving neurosciences, which stress the importance of the narrative in an effectively programmed message. Only narratives have the power to activate mirror neurons responsible, among others, for the deep processing of the message and the mentalisation process.

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