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An Interactionist Approach to Document Analysis: Hidden Values in Advertising Images

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Abstract

This work illustrates some social values permeating contemporary society that we can identify through the analysis of a specific kind of document: advertising images. For this study I selected these images, using some criteria, from three weekly magazines published during the first three months of 2012.

From the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, and with the aid of the 'sensitizing concept' notion (Blumer, 1969), the investigation shows that the values are not natural and innate, that they are relative to spatial and temporal contexts, that they have an origin and they can be forgotten. They arise from social construction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and *definition of the situation* (Thomas, 1972 [1931]). Furthermore, especially in contemporary societies, values that are contradictory coexist.

Some of the conceptual constructs resulting from the research, and reported in this study, have been so named: Quantitymania, Competition, Success, Distinction, Reification, Myth of eternal youth.

The results of the analysis are still used for a teaching workshop with a twofold objective: to train students to use a qualitative research analysis tool with the invitation to activate their sociological imaginations and to refine their perception; to illustrate socio-psychological theoretical references through an interactive and also involving modality, because it makes reference to contemporary reality.

Keywords: social values, document analysis, advertising images.

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1. The topic and the research technique

This work arises from some reflections on the social values permeating contemporary society. These reflections have given life to the research on this topic that I have carried out using various instruments. Here I propose a technique that makes use of a specific source of information: documents.

Of the various definitions of value, I cite here Kluckhohn's (1951: 395): 'A conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of actions.'

From their birth, anthropology, philosophy,¹ psychology² and sociology, both of the positivist and the anti-positivist type, have been concerned with social values: Durkheim underlines the role of the mutable social environment in the transmission of values, what he called 'collective representations' (1996 [1898])³. Weber, on the other hand, saw an active role for the subjects and places at the centre of his theory of social action an attention to the meaning that the social actor attributes to his or her behaviour, and which orientates their actions (1980 [1922]: vol. I).

Across the Atlantic, from the first decades of the 1900s, Symbolic Interactionism helped realize a recognition of the impulse exercised by the cultural sphere, understood in the general sense, on social phenomena: the influence of ideative processes on behaviour was at the heart of the theorizations of the exponents of the Chicago School. Values were considered as objects to which a meaning was attached, shared by a group of individuals of greater or lesser extent; they represent that which is desirable and are connected to action, in other words they assume explicit meaning when embodied in human activity (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1968 [1918-20]: vol. I). Becker (1963 [1950]) has underlined the affective and emotional component of this.

Obviously it is not easy to study and research into these mental constructions and it also for this reason, as mentioned, that I have sought to identify them using various techniques. For this study I have chosen to analyse

¹ From Plato's and Aristotle's thinking, to Kant's, to the 'Philosophy of Values', an approach affirmed during the first half of the 1900s.

² Initially, in researching into opinions and attitudes, psychologists made use of what is known as the introspective method (Ebbinghaus, 1975 [1885]); (Wundt, 1900 [1896]) or 'think-aloud protocols'.

³ The French sociologist also elaborated the idea, later taken up by Goffman in analysis of daily interaction, that values, norms, mental categories have need of the support of rituals in their diffusion and maintenance (Sciolla, 2002)

some documents – advertising images, as we shall see below – which I then proposed to six classes of students over the duration of a teaching workshop.

The use of documents is one of the groups of techniques of information collection considered in qualitative research.⁴ A document is therefore any material (not only printed) that provides information on a social phenomenon, which narrates explicitly, or often implicitly, values, opinions, stereotypes widespread in social groups. Narration can also be provided by physical traces (the wear and tear on floorings or on books) and ‘things’: Michel Foucault (1976 [1975]), for example, wrote about the ‘disciplinary society’ using the circular architectures of some buildings (*panopticon*), which allow for detailed surveillance of what goes on within them.

Unlike those groups of techniques based on observation and various types of interview, the information gathered through documents exists independently of the research and therefore do not react to the researcher’s intervention but, as with data gathered by other means, ‘they don’t have their own voice’ and therefore they must be interpreted.

It is customary to distinguish ‘personal’ documents from ‘institutional’ documents. Regarding the former, history has used and continues to use prevalently those produced by important figures, whereas the social sciences have given priority to ordinary people who, not having a public use as their purpose, present sphere of intimacy and personal interpretation.

Between the 1920s and 1930s, the researchers of the Chicago School made considerable use of documents of a personal type: autobiographies (for example Wladek’s in *The Polish Peasant in Europa and America*, or Sutherland’s 1937 *The Professional Thief*); diaries (used by the Lynds in their research on Middletown) and letters (from Polish peasants in the work just cited).

⁴ In the works with a qualitative approach from the end of the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, the methodological aspects of qualitative research were mentioned in a scattered, non-systematic way. We are referring to classical studies such as those of James, Cooley, Thomas, Park, Mead and others less remote among which, for example, that of Whyte (1968 [1943]). Since the end of the 1980s, manual-style works have been published both in the United States and in Italy. These illustrate in an organic way qualitative research method and techniques: for example shadowing, participant observation, various types of qualitative interview (structured, semi-structured, unstructured), focus group, documentary observation, ethnographic content analysis. Regarding these contribution see, among others, Schwartz and Jacobs (1979 [1987]), Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2011), Cipolla and De Lillo (1996), Altheide (2000 [1996]) and subsequent publications including Schneider, Corbetta, (2003), Cardano (2011).

Institutional documents include elements taken from the mass media (such as press articles, television, radio and new media broadcasts,⁵ and the new media including commercials, advertising images,⁶ etc.), fiction, teaching materials (for example school manuals), fairy tales and stories from popular culture, judicial material⁷ (court decisions, trial transcripts, testimony, etc.), political documents (manifestoes, programmes, slogans, etc.), company and administrative documents (accounting figures, school exam papers, contracts wills, school reports with assessments, etc.).

In 1979 Goffman published a study on gender stereotypes with a comparative analysis of images taken from advertising, newspaper articles, photographs of private individuals; attention was focused also on the features and the use of body details (height, fingers, hands, faces) as well as on rituals in posture – for example *ritualization of subordination* and *licensed withdrawal*.

Millard (2009) analysed from an interactionist perspective the ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ of the *Dove* cosmetics brand. This study examines *Dove*’s presentation of beauty and women’s reactions to it within a ‘beauty as performance’ framework. It does not use document analysis, but is based on interviews and focus groups with sixteen Canadian women.

I chose to analyse sets of advertising images on the basis of the idea that for several decades now advertising has no longer simply sold products, but also lifestyles (Fabris, 1997) and images of the self; in truth advertising constructs and proposes realities that are based on more or less widespread values. Thus I was inspired by the supposition that advertising professionals propose representations whose efficacy is tied to the fact that they make reference to values felt as being familiar, belonging to the society and the culture out of which they are born and to which they are addressed, even though people are not necessarily aware of having internalized these values.

⁵ The analysis of the soap opera *The Guiding Light* (broadcast in Italy with the title *Sentieri*), for example, is interesting. This analysis sheds light on the various images of women over the course of 40 years: initially only a housewife, then involved in typically feminine roles (nurse, switchboard operator, primary school teacher, etc.) and then ‘career woman’, who embarks on involvement in working activity that was then considered male. Analogously, interaction between the genders has changed (Cantor and Pingree, 1983).

⁶ Altheide notes that ‘most of the documents analysis is oriented towards the written text, although public information and popular culture are mainly composed of images’ (2000 [1996]: 84). Moreover, there is a branch of sociology, known indeed as ‘visual sociology’ that deals specifically with analysis of fixed and moving images (Mattioli, 1991; Faccioli, Losacco, 2010; Frisina, 2013).

⁷ See, for example, Perrotta (1994).

With values, which orientate people as to what is held to be good and correct, the emotional element is of considerable relevance, as mentioned above. Therefore, a further plausible conjecture is that in order to reach their objective the creative professionals of advertising turn to emotional rather than cognitive effect (indeed often in commercials the informational element is in a secondary position). Emotional effect, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) underline, has a strong persuasive force.⁸ It follows that the more one identifies with values that are firmly interiorized, even since primary socialization, then the better the (advertising) message is conveyed.

Moreover, advertising embodies diffused values but at the same time it proposes emergent values, which can be appropriate for targets of individuals who are receptive to change, to novelty and/or who belong to elites. In a certain sense, when they make clash in contrast with traditional values, the “new values” redefine the situation⁹ and encourage appreciation of products that are (initially) niche products.

For the reasons described up to this point, advertising images seem to me to be a reliable source of data gathering for social values (traditional and emergent).

However, as suggested by cognitivist psychology – with reference to cognitive elements – and sociological currents such as Symbolic Interactionism and ethnomethodology – with reference to habitual behaviour – the deepest values are those we are least conscious of, which are therefore difficult to recognize and interpret. This is why I have turned to the conceptual contribution of interactionism, which helps us see the things that habitually we do not see.

In particular, I was inspired by the notion of ‘sensitizing concept’ put forward by Blumer (1969) and the principles of ethnographic content analysis (ECA) proposed by Altheide (2000 [1996]).

In quantitative content analysis (QCA) the primary aim is ‘to verify or confirm hypothesized relationships rather than discover new or emerging patterns’ (Altheide, 2000 [1996]: 26). Instead in ECA of great importance is ‘the reflective and highly interactive nature of the investigator ... Unlike QCA, where the protocol is the instrument, in ECA the investigator is continually at the center ... Categories and variables initially guide the study, others are allowed and expected to emerge to be taken into account in the course of the

⁸ During primary socialization, authors maintain, affective and emotional identification with agents of socialization is necessary in order to learn and interiorize values and models of behaviour, and even knowledge and skills.

⁹ The concept of *definition of the situation* sheds light on the fact that it is the vision of the objects that guides reactions to them (Perrotta, 2009).

study, including an orientation towards constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances' (Altheide, 2000 [1996]: 27). Regarding the images, the author remembers that there are various approaches 'that go in search of underlying messages or cultural signs, within images, which can then be related to sign systems' (Altheide, 2000 [1996]: 84), and suggests identifying 'codes', which I would call criteria, to analyze the photos. The code set constitutes the 'protocol: a way to ask question of a document; a protocol is a list of questions, items, categories, or variables that guide data collection from documents' (Altheide, 2012: 44).

I studied all the issues of three weekly magazines from different publishers (*Venerdì di Repubblica*, *Oggi*, *Panorama*) published during the first three months of 2012. Browsing them page by page I dwelt on each advertisement, observing carefully their overall composition and their details, and I read the texts of the captions. Initially I selected the images that struck me because:

- a) in them there were iconic and/or written elements, whether overt or more covert, that had no connection with the objects or services advertised, or where the link was very slight and therefore to me seemed forced (for example, an inappropriate use of numbers; 'fascinating personality' applied to an automobile; a sort of ayurvedic circle associated with a brand of telephony, etc.);
- b) They presented generic situation and scenes in which the product proposed had a very reduced position or almost disappeared, with only a logo for example;
- c) They contained emotionally strong terms or expressions or they referenced an idea that I felt as familiar (for example: face up to them, challenge, prohibited, triumphs, victory, exclusively, the original, get it!, limited edition; ritual).

Gradually, therefore, I identified the constitutive criteria of the protocol that I then followed throughout the survey.

Then I gathered together the advertisements that carried similar situations and elements. I then classified them, identifying their mutual aspects.

Finally, with a mental approach sensitive to the concept of 'social value', I asked myself to which ideas, values, those aspects that seemed strange or more or less incongruous to me might make reference. This part of the work was obviously informed by the aforementioned references, by my experience of research and by my general socio-psychological and community background, deriving in good part from a tacit introjected knowledge ever

since primary socialization, which I made the effort to bring to consciousness.¹⁰

When it seemed to me that I had identified a concept of value, I imagined a terminological label that I held to be appropriate. I adopted some that are already widespread and used in socio-psychological research and in journalistic language (for example, *Competition*, *Stereotypes regarding gender roles* or *Myth of eternal youth*) together with some original or rarely used ones.

2. The teaching workshop

As mentioned, I created a teaching workshop in the context of courses of Qualitative Methodology and Theory and Techniques of Communication, in which I presented to my students of the second and third year of the three-year degree course in Psychological Sciences and Techniques slides of the advertising images selected using the above criteria, grouped thematically. I asked them to consider them attentively, to examine the images and the words they contained, and then to propose ideas of the values, tendencies, themes, customs, which in their opinion were to be seen in those representations.

There was a twofold objective in the workshop:

- to train students to use a qualitative research analysis tool with the invitation to activate their sociological imagination and to refine their gaze;
- to illustrate socio-psychological theoretical references through an interactive and also involving modality, because it makes reference to contemporary reality.

Perrotta, with an interactionist perspective, has underlined the benefits of an interactive training: 'getting to know the learners' point of view helps teachers to come out of stereotyped ideas ...; it allows for a modulation of the teaching with the interests and problems of the interlocutors as point of departure ...; it renders relations easier and more gratifying and thus allows us to obtain better results' (2005: 57).

Initially almost all the students mentioned the target at which, in their opinion, the advertising was aimed (women, or youngsters, or housewives, professionals, people involved in sport, etc.); secondly they mentioned the type of product advertised (cosmetics, detergents, automobiles, objects for furnishing, training courses, writing courses, and so forth); or quite explicit themes and/or stereotypes: the desire to be more beautiful/handsome, to

¹⁰ On the study of implicit knowledge, see also Marradi and Fobert Veutro (2001).

appear younger, chic, well-off, up-to-date; consumerism, fitness, woman-object, *machismo*, etc.

I considered their proposals with interest and conversations sprung up on the various themes indicated (for example on sexism,¹¹ on the unattainable models of beauty, on technological obsolescence). Then I invited them to observe more carefully the details, encouraging them to provide exposition of the meanings that were perhaps assigned to them, to identify a possible common element among all the slides of each group of images and, if there was consensus on some elements, to propose a name for the possible unifying concept.

Gradually, under my guidance, there emerged concepts of value that were initially not imagined or which brought clarity to thoughts that had been confused or barely touched on. I sought to intervene in a discreet manner, limiting my intrusion and eventually providing my keys to reading, which in some cases were further refined through the interaction with the students. For example, I noticed that in general the students, more than I did, paid attention to the colours (of eyes, of objects, of the combination of tints within the same image), to details regarding the modernity (or its absence, especially technological) of certain products, and in one case they identified a reference to 'natural' active ingredients, which were therefore automatically healthy and effective ('face line with active lactic ferments').

To help in noting students' reactions and favouring analysis of their contributions and their emotions – thus rendering the experience not only didactic but also heuristic – I could have organized focus groups.¹² However,

¹¹ The tendency to reinforce and evaluate characteristics, abilities and activities of people on the basis of biological sex and gender. It can lead to discrimination and/or devaluation, also only paternalistic, of one or the other sex, as has come about historically with regard to women.

¹² These are debates focused on a precise event that the components of the group take part in (after having seen a film or other form of show, or, as in the workshop illustrated here, after having seen some slides together; listened to a radio programme; taken part directly in a certain social fact) or a precise event that they in any case know through direct or indirect experience (for example the condition of disability or such). With their common experience as point of departure, which can also be programmed by the researcher, who has studied the event examined beforehand, the individuals are interviewed by him or her in the group and are stimulated so as to bring out the various interpretations, the emotional reactions, the critical evaluations. The leader of the discussion seeks to study the problem in depth, to avoid some individuals monopolizing the discussion, to favour discussion from the shyer people present and to keep note of everything (Corbetta, 2003). One of the texts dedicated specifically to this technique is by Corrao (2005).

this technique is not suitable with high numbers of participants (some classes had more than forty students), and perhaps neither is it suitable with subjects who are not yet familiar with the topic proposed. Nevertheless, I believe that for topics such as these, and similar topics, the focus group may prove to be a useful modality of enquiry, naturally forming small groups of no more than ten people and maybe older.

Lastly, I offered sociological references on each value that emerged. Overall the experience lasted some two and three quarter hours with a brief interval (during which I observed some students continue to comment on this or that advertisement).

The active participation in and appreciation of these exercises – sometimes including surprises, as when out of an ambiguous figure comes a distinct form – convinced me of the utility of repeating the workshop, which has had overall some 250 participants, male and female, and to write up the experience and some results.

3. The values that emerged

The number of images presented for each set varied from four to seven. The space available here means that I present only some from each group; I describe the others when necessary for understanding and for the completeness of the argument. Here are the first that I presented:

FIGURE 1.



FIGURE 2.



A third image depicts two pots of a famous brand of cosmetic cream with the headline, ‘More beautiful today than at 20.’ The caption, quite detailed, promises among other things, ‘a prodigious youthful effect’ and ‘amazing results’ with regard to three aspects – smoothness, firmness, uniformity of colour – and indicates percentages of improvement respectively: 94, 92, 96.

Another image is a photograph of the buttocks of a young woman, an example, according to the text that accompanies the image, of an improvement in tone of 27% in four weeks, obviously through use of this cream. The last advertisement (‘glutes treatment’) assures the same effect as the previous one (27%) but, rather than showing the part of the body, it presents the tube with a detailed description of the active ingredients of the product.

As is easily imagined, initially attention is framed towards values such as beauty, youth, physical perfection: sexism exemplified through the exposition of the female body.

Gradually, through my encouragement, the amount of numbers that appear in the images was noted; indeed, the second slide reproduced here shows three triple percentages (87, 80 and 83; 97, 90 and 80; 77, 97 and 93) relative to the (apparent) recorded positive effects of these products on nine aspects of the skin and the face. So an awareness arose that what these advertisements have in common is the exhibition of very highly detailed

percentage points.¹³ Thus we wondered, partly serious, partly joking, if it is really possible to quantify with such precision the effects of a cosmetic product.

The conclusion was that in the advertising professionals' intentions, probably, the attractiveness of these images is linked to the presence of a value that is very familiar to our society, and which we often fail to be aware of: what we might call *Quantitymania* or the *Cult of number*. Thus, the efficacy of the images is greater because it conveys a central theme in the collective imaginary of our communities: certainty, reliability, objectivity, precision, scientific approach, all these are guaranteed (only) if the phenomenon considered has been quantified through numbers.

Having personally ascertained how the relevance of the numbers tends to slip past because, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) would put it, it is 'taken for granted', 'given as obvious', made the sociological reference with which I illustrated the birth of this obviousness more interesting for the students.

I pointed out that in effect, as Comte has already noted in the *Opuscules de philosophie sociale* and in the *Cours de philosophie positive*, in modern and contemporary Western societies the authority of science has substituted that of religion. In interpreting the changes in his epoch, the French sociologist had foretold the decline of theological and military society and the birth of the scientific and industrial society, arguing that the figure of the scientist would substitute that of the priest and that industrialists would come to occupy the position once attributed to warriors in the social hierarchy.

I recalled that European sociology, with Saint-Simon, Comte and Durkheim, was born under the influence of a positivist and epistemological outlook and that in our societies, in the wake of this thought that grants superiority to the research method used in natural sciences (and which must also be adopted in the other sciences), there has spread a conception of scientific activity linked to the use of numbers, to the point of creating improbable or even risible outcomes.

There is an evident reverberation of this framework regarding the accusations (today considerably reduced) of lack of scientific approach that sociologists and methodologists with a scientist orientation have levelled at qualitative research methods.

As mentioned, the widespread belief regarding the link between guarantees of a scientific approach and the use of numbers, statistics, tables, graphs, was much reinforced in the 1800s thanks to the cultural hegemony of positivism. Sociological examination of the outcomes of the exercises thus

¹³ Obviously these advertisements are only a small group drawn from the many that insert numbers and percentages in their images and their texts.

allowed me to underline that values are not natural and innate, that they are relative to spatial and temporal contexts, that they have an origin and they can be forgotten. They are products of *definition of the situation*, of social construction: the reference to Berger and Luckmann on the relevance of the primary and secondary socialization and of resocialization was of fundamental importance.

I then proposed two closely linked values and I present here some images that I believe are representative of them.

FIGURE 3.



In the first is an imperious incitation to compete ('Never stop challenging yourself') with the forces of nature: the sea in a storm; in the second to compete with other human beings: 'Face up to them all'. 'Challenge the 16 best players in the world ... Scale the international charts ...'

In yet another image, which I projected to the classes, a European long-jump champion features in an advertisement for a well known brand of male underwear.

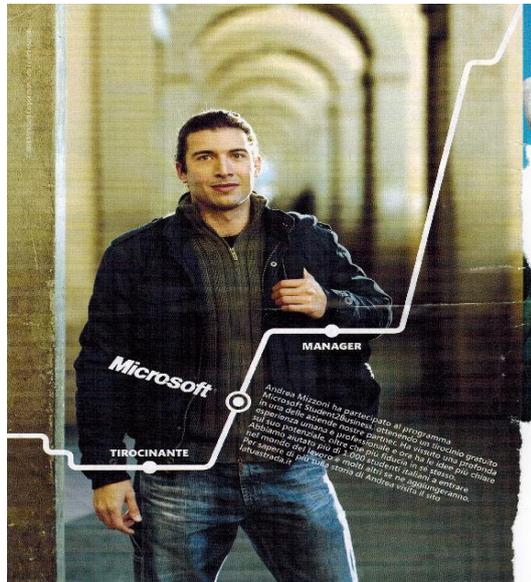
Note here incidentally that if this had been an advertisement for female underwear then the model would have been chosen for her attractiveness, not her competitive ability as in the advertisement just described. The choice of

using a quality considered as typically male makes reference to another value (sexism), the co-presence of which in the same advertisement testifies to the tendency to manifest not one single value but an *habitus*¹⁴, an overall lifestyle, a behavioural set inspired by several interconnected values.

Another image offered to my audience embodies the same idea making use even of animals (to advertise a brand of pet food): ‘Make your cat a Protagonist ... ready to become famous!’

It is evident that the discourse here regards a value that for some time has permeated, and increasingly so, our society: *Competition*, to which, as mentioned, can be associated the value of *Success*, of which the image that follows seems particularly emblematic.

FIGURE 4.



This young man, his gaze directed towards the observer, is on a high-flying career path, indicated by the white line, thanks to a particular training course he's registered on; it is interesting to note that the ascent of this line is theoretically infinite, there is no interruption and it does not end with a

¹⁴ This is a concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu 1983 [1979]): a system of inclinations to perceive, to think and to do in certain ways, interiorized unconsciously by each individual. *Habitus* produced by similar conditions of existence are similar to one another and form the 'class *habitus*'.

completed outcome but continues ideally over the page of the magazine that carries the advert.

The social duty to compete in daily and professional life was not widely diffused in societies in the past, societies in which challenges and competitions were limited to certain contexts – chivalrous, bellicose, artistic, sporting – even in ‘democratic’ ancient Greece. Social inequalities were furthermore justified by authoritarian and theocratic regimes as being of divine origin.

Then the institution of the medieval guilds, with their consequent hierarchical fixity, discouraged people from imagining and desiring social mobility.

We can consider how even in the higher social classes earnings (material expression of success) were not considered an end in themselves but were considered with indifference or were even considered immoral: they were not to be accumulated, but were to be used in luxurious court feasts and/or in patronage activities and in prestigious art collections.

It was interesting, over the course of the workshop, to consider certain values, that according to received culture seemed completely familiar, we might even say eternal, but which instead are linked to geographical and temporal contexts; such as, for example, the values of social upward mobility through competition, and success as an outcome, which began to spread in the West¹⁵ with industrialization, not before.

As is known, Weber’s celebrated work (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) identifies one of the causes (without excluding others) in the union between the syndrome of values propounded by the Protestant ethic and those of the then newborn industrial capitalism, which aimed at an ever increasing, possibly infinite, maximalization of earnings. The Lutheran doctrine, which devalued the monastic concept of ascended beings and extended the concept of vocation to professional work, and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which invited those who were not certain of being in God’s grace, such as priests, to find on this earth the signs of their election to the heavens, all these were in effect the premises of the secular and worldly ascended beings, of the quest for success. Success in business would therefore be a sign of moral virtue, of belonging to the group of the elect.¹⁶

¹⁵ In the China of Confucius, for example, with a system of values centred on devotion to the family and on the prestige of social status, economic and professional success were not as important. (Sciolla, 2002: 182-183)

¹⁶ Weber’s thesis is not universally accepted. It is maintained by some that the so-called ‘Protestant ethic’ already existed before the Reformation in various social groupings, including the merchants of Lucca and in a more extended sense among the Italian merchant bourgeoisie, already organized along ‘pre-capitalistic’ lines.

Since then the theme has been revisited and contemporary research, such as that carried out by McClelland (1961), who developed the theses of Weber and Shumpeter. These revisitations have underlined how the ‘need for achievement’ is in effect present in the educational systems of highly specialized and industrialized societies.

Therefore there may be a link between the economic development of a country and the widespread presence of a motivation towards competition and success. Also noted is the fact that this tendency is more diffused through the higher social strata whereas values of solidarity (‘affiliation’), lived as being compensatory, were adopted more frequently in the lower social strata, more inclined to make do with ‘retreatism’ (Merton, 1938).

Regarding the disposition towards competition, the sociologist of knowledge Franco Cassano (2005), with regard to fundamentalisms, observes that there exists a Western fundamentalism: the ‘religion of competition’ exemplified, for example, in the obsession with finance; the nodding, the looks, the breviary of shares that is recited on the Stock Exchanges, all resemble religious rites.

Another theme dealt with by sociologists of cultural processes is that of consumption as cultural practices, and the dynamics that characterize them.

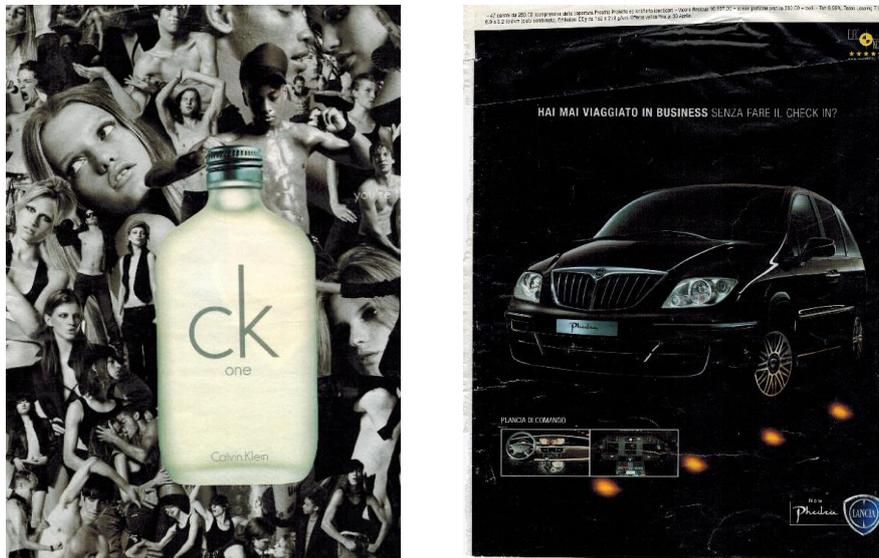
As the symbolic interactionists underline, objects have no value in themselves, they derive *meaning* from the *definition* that is given to them (Thomas (1972 [1931])). Here below I present or describe some advertising images that regard some aspects of such dynamics and which manifest a value that increasingly permeates our society.

We see, in these adverts, objects connected, in a mass society, to the magic power of valorizing the self-image of those who possess these objects, rendering *unique* his or her social identity.

As suggested by the first image, the Calvin Klein perfume renders *unique* (‘one’) in an undifferentiated multitude of anonymous individuals. Possession of the automobile advertised in the second image introduces its purchaser into an exclusive circle of privileged people who ‘travel in business class without having to check-in’ as ordinary mortals do. Other adverts that I showed in class proposed ‘limited edition’ products; one of the captions proclaimed imperiously, ‘I want the original’; in another a tailor’s¹⁷ hands patiently sew the finishings of ‘Armchairs and sofas like that, handmade one by one.’

¹⁷ Parenthetically, if the tailor is male then the prestige of the object increases; a tailoress would not be the same thing, like a female cook compared to a male cook.

FIGURE 5.



As in the title of Bourdieu's celebrated work (1983 [1979]), I have given this set of aspirations the name *Distinction*, or even *Exclusivism*. The higher social classes' propensity towards distinguishing themselves from the rest of the population is certainly an ancient one, but it become rather widespread with the advent of industrial production and its related mass consumption.

A recent video advertising an automobile, frequently shown on television, has as its slogan, precisely 'The Art of Standing Out'. It is accompanied by references to six very famous artworks, disguised in urban landscapes, passers-by, shop interiors: Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, Seurat's *Bathers at Asnières* and then slightly less famous works by Koons, Mondrian and Hopper. The invitation is evidently to consider also the automobile advertised as a work of art. The interesting point, however, is that the campaign – which in fact aims to launch a brand rather than a single product (the car itself is not presented in a prominent position) – is designed for a category of audience receptive to cultural icons that, in societies such as ours with a mass culture industry, are frequently proposed. Homing in on the recognition of the artworks, the creators of the video are thus nodding to those who feel themselves to be connoisseurs of art, who thus distinguish themselves from the masses: these people, pleased with themselves, will pay attention to the video and to the automobile that is advertised.

Perhaps in order to capture fringe elements consisting of more shrewd television viewers, the campaign inserts less celebrated works; probably these last subjects, in their turn, are perceived as being further distinguished from the mass of the presumed (ingenuous) connoisseurs. And so on, in the potentially infinite cyclical process identified by Simmel (1985 [1911]), who in the activity of consumption (tangible and intangible) saw two contrasting principles at work: imitation and differentiation. The former is the tendency to conform to others' lifestyles that are considered elevated and prestigious; the latter is the disposition towards, once having come into possession of a set of objects considered prestige, abandoning possessions in order to acquire others more elite and thus to be distinguished from the multitude. The *reference groups* change;¹⁸ and may also be inspired by the *phantom community* (Athens, 1997), imaginary groups, not really present alongside the individual (for example, artists, writers), but who nevertheless orientate the individual's behaviour.

Baudrillard (1972 [1968]) illustrated the seductive languages of advertising and underlined the symbolic value of commercial goods: consumption, as a source of identity, can make us feel special, unique.

The adjectives that Veblen (1969 [1899]) used to characterize purchasing choices in modern society have enjoyed good fortune: consumption, in order to grant prestige and exclusiveness, should be 'conspicuous and superfluous'. The presupposition, therefore, is that the desired effect is consciously sought after. Bourdieu (1983 [1979]), however, argues that the *habitus*, consisting of the 'tastes', consumer preferences, is for the most part unconscious. From a Marxist perspective, he considers consumption as cultural practices through which class conflict¹⁹ is developed, and within this the struggle for distinction may be an aspect.

¹⁸ Shibutani (1972 [1955]: 165) defines a reference group as 'that group whose outlook is used by the actor as the frame of reference in the organization of his perceptual field.' As Perrotta underlines (2009), the author clarifies that they can be either groups the individual forms part of, or categories to which he or she does not belong (for example a social class or an ethnic group that is not their own).

¹⁹ Bourdieu revisited Marxian thought, distinguishing three fractions of capital: as well as economic capital, he considers also 'social capital' and 'cultural capital'. It follows that a fragmentation of the social classes (compared to the Marxian original pair: capitalist and proletarian) takes place, forming in the intersections between the various fractions of capital. For example, a certain social class may possess high-level economic and social capital, but low-level cultural capital; another social class may have an inverse configuration. In this treatment, consumption plays a significant role in identifying class and in the distinction (and/or conflict) with regard to other classes, upper or subaltern.

FIGURE 6.



As well as the quest for exclusivity, consumerism has probably also favoured the accentuation of the spread of another value well represented by some images, which I present below and in which human bodies disappear in

their relation to things – they are only outlines – or they themselves become things.

In these adverts we see: two incorporeal outlines of a woman; female shapes embodied suggestively in fire extinguisher (with the caption, ‘Forms that ignite passion’) advertising a high fashion brand; a young body ‘thingified’ in a backpack. During the workshop I showed others that conveyed the same idea: in one, for example, there are fashionable shoe boxes in place of the head because, as the caption states, ‘imagination walks.’

If we look at this critically, the tendency recalls the brute power of things, of objects that overwhelm the characteristics and the qualities of the human being, to the point of possessing him or her. It is as though they emphasize that objects grant us identity. Objects important to us, James brings to light (1950 [1890]), are part of our material self and, in a society such as ours, this aspect of the self acquires ever-increasing relevance. This is also because we are often judged on the basis of what we possess and, as Cooley underlines (1956 [1902]: 183-84) regarding the ‘looking-glass self’, we are driven to see ourselves in the way we think our *significant others* see us.

In giving a name to this attitude, a term taken from philosophy proves to be effective, in particular Marxian and Marxist philosophy: *Reification*, i.e. rendering as object, as thing, both people and social phenomena.

Durkheim had placed this at the basis of his method of research: it is necessary to consider ‘social facts as things.’ As mentioned above, he gave the name ‘collective representations’ to sets of beliefs felt by individuals to be coercive and external, equipped with the objectivity of ‘things’, which they have not contributed to creating and which they cannot modify.

The term reification is associated with characteristics of rigidity, fixity, persistence, lack of critical sense and of flexibility.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) show how the reality of which we have experience, although being the result of human behaviour, is objectified and reified, i.e. it tends to appear as the result of nature or of the will of superior beings, and is then introjected, in the process of socialization, as the only possible reality – the reality that provides security, on which everything stands.

Although it is a social construction, introjected reality tends to appear ‘natural’, necessary. Let us consider, for example, the tendency to see as natural and not cultural (i.e., the result of socialization) many aspects of behaviour and attitude. Examples of stereotypes, which are forms of reification, are numerous: ‘brave’ male children, ‘pretty’ female children, ‘strong and decided’ men, ‘weak and sensitive’ women, ethnic groups with conventional characterizations and manner, and so forth.

Bringing the *naturalness* of these differences into doubt creates in the human being a feeling of astonishment because the reality introjected in the

course of primary socialization, the reality that is believed to be the only possible reality, thus undergoes a serious attack.

Let us consider, for example, the fear currently provoked by what is known as ‘gender theory,’ those theorizations that shed light on the social construction of male and female roles.

Grinswold (1997 [1994]) has seen that considering social problems as cultural objects,²⁰ not deriving only from structural causes, would avoid reification and could suggest alternative solutions. Indeed, the type of possible solution of a social problem is implicit in the way in which the ‘creator’ defines it: if for example it is established that terrorism comes from “rogue states,” the only solution seen as effective is to bomb those territories.

FIGURE 7.



In general, it seems to me that this widespread disposition towards blocking that which is fluid, changeable, and fixing it as something impersonal allows us to see in empty human bodies, or human bodies embodied as

²⁰ This scholar puts forward various examples for analysis from the perspective of the ‘cultural diamond’: road accidents, ethnic conflict, AIDS, teenage pregnancies, homosexuality. We may imagine others: for example youth unemployment, which although already present, was not considered as being a social problem before the 1970s.

objects (which can appear disturbing), emblematic icons of a reality in which materiality, tangibility, have a reassuring value.

Probably such dispositions are present in the collective imaginary, which consumerism has rendered more evident and which advertising professionals make use of.

It seems that the desire to appear younger than one actually is has become a value in contemporary society, a true and proper social duty to be carried out with commitment, unlike the past when at the most it was occasionally referenced in myths and fiction (for example *Faust* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), but it did not have the same widespread cogency.

Now instead it is clearly expressed in some advertising images reproduced below.

‘It is forbidden to grow old!’ the first warns. In the caption of the second image bellicose terminology is used: the cosmetic advertised ‘*triumphs* over time’ and has ‘the *mission*’ of improving your profile, ‘wrinkles and loss of tone are *terrible enemies*’, these treatments ‘have among their achievements *the greatest victory of all: preserving your youth!*’ (my italics).

I proposed to my students other images of the same ilk, which are easily come across. The most obvious label for this syndrome is the *Myth of eternal youth*. It is enough to think of Russian literature of the 1800s to note that in previous epochs the period of life known as youth covered a very limited arc of years, it was brief passage from childhood to adulthood, and at not even forty years of age one was already almost elderly.

Indeed, Manheim (2008 [1928]) in his essay on the generations, shed light on how in the past the concept of youth was not as delineated as it is now. In his opinion, youth began to be considered as a distinct period of life only between the two world wars, becoming idealized and praised during the Fascist dictatorships.

The condition, or question, of youth began to be discussed and studies on the theme flourished, which however only took into consideration the young themselves who, for various reasons, were more visible – the hippies at the end of the ’50s; the ‘young rebels’ of the ’60s; the Beat Generation; the young protesters of 1968; then the yuppies, expressive of the retreat from politics; the new ‘Metropolitan Indians’, etc.

The psychologist Erikson (1974 [1968]) used the expression ‘psychosocial moratorium’ to describe the recent disposition towards dilating the time of life in which one is considered young and in which in advanced capitalist societies and societies with a certain widespread wealth for at least some social classes, there is a tolerance of extensive social exploration free from specific obligations.

Some political observers have traced in this a pattern drawn up by the managing classes: a conscious and deliberate dilatory policy regarding the entry of the young into adulthood, and in particular into a labour market with an increasingly restrictive capacity to absorb workers, even skilled workers. The predictable conflict in this situation is perhaps neutralized with the creation of a sort of parking area, awaiting better times.

It is plausible that in this cultural climate the myth of being young and of eternal youth was diffused and reinforced. Furthermore, recently, this aim has been manifested also by those in government who have invoked the 'scrapping' (the substitution) of political representatives who are no longer young.

The impression is that the social obligation to be or to seem young is particularly relevant for women everywhere. Nevertheless, the Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi (2000) has argued that this aspiration on the part of women is particularly acute in Western societies. She maintains that if in the East men use space to dominate women – for example imposing on them the veil if they want to enter public places – in the West they use time and image: a woman who is no longer young or who does not appear as such is not attractive. Many Western women, albeit educated and intelligent, have taken on board the male definition and consequently they live with the obsession of eternal youth.²¹

4. Concluding considerations

Advertisements therefore sell objects recalling an easily recognizable value (such as beauty, elegance, health of body and mind), and in doing so they rely on another value that remains implicit, usually not directly perceived by the public. However, they are influenced by the hidden value because it reproduces assumptions assimilated since primary socialization, such as the attribution of scientificity to numbers and percentages.

In this essay I traced the social values that emerged (*Quantitymania, Competition, Success, Distinction, Reification, Myth of eternal youth*) in sociological literature (mainly of cultural processes), both classical and more recent. They can be held to be widespread, and relatively widely shared not only a few years ago, at the time of the survey, but still today.

In support of this consideration, analyzing eight issues of the same magazines chosen in 2012 but published in January 2019, I came across advertising images containing elements that recall the concepts illustrated,

²¹ On images of women in East and West see Fobert Veutro (2010).

which I exemplify below. One of the captions of an advertisement of the Pegaso Telematic University is imperative: 'Fly High'; similarly, another that advertises the Academy Business School is 'Build a career as a leader', both written in large letters (*Success*).

In other images, several terms and sentences recall the value that has been called *Distinction*: 'choice', 'unique characteristics', 'inimitable specialties', 'exclusive suspension' (by Suv Citroën C5), 'Your eyes deserve the best', 'The difference is heard' (by Radio Capital), 'Authentic and guaranteed original flavors', 'The most sought-after novels by those who understand them', 'Prosecco Aneri drank from the Great people of the world'.

Percentages and statistics (*Quantitymania*) continue to encourage, for example, potential buyers of Beretta cooked ham: '100% controlled supply chain, 100% attention to consumers, 100% gluten-free, lactose-free...'; 6 Italian out of 10 suffer from 'periodontitis' (advertisement by International Microdentistry Institute).

An example of desire for *Competition* can be found in the slogan 'Extreme performance', guaranteed to those who use Selva outboard engines; in other images sporting champions are portrayed, like Ivan Zaytsev, or appear captions like 'Nausea? You can *win* it'.

In a cosmetic advertisement the obligation to appear younger is embodied by a beautiful model, 'Kourtney Kardashian, 39 Radiant Awakening', who looks a lot younger than 39.

A minimalist and refined blue *ramage* emerges from the collar of an elegant coat (brand Tagliatore) and replaces the head: it recalls the value that has been called *Reification*.

In seeking to identify a connection between the constructs that emerged from the analysis, it is useful to briefly recall the theories of the Frankfurt School, the postmodernism represented by Baudrillard, and Cultural Studies.

According to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the 'cultural industry' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1966 [1947]), of which advertising is fully part, carries out a political action of legitimizing the dominant ideology in the capitalist world. This ideology is also recognizable in 'the consumer society' which Baudrillard speaks of (2010 [1970]): it creates a 'pastiche', that amalgamates all cultural forms into one language, also absorbing the contradictory instances. However, in the tradition of Cultural Studies, which developed in Birmingham from the 1960s onwards and shares with critical theory the Marxist approach, the dominant culture is not considered homogenous and incontrovertible, inevitably imposed on the subordinate classes. Alternative values can spread through strenuous negotiation and conflict processes and thus they speak of 'public' in the plural (Paccagnella, 2004).

In fact, as several scholars have pointed out (for example, Gallino, 2006: 717; Sciolla, (2002), in modern and above all contemporary societies there coexist values with opposing traits, values that are contradictory; there is the co-presence of various symbolic systems that are not always correlated. This fact can also emerge from a joint analysis of some advertising images, such as those I presented to my students and which I describe below.

One, for example, exemplifies the tendency towards individualism, towards egocentrism: the logo of a well-known telephony brand is a circle that suggests an all-embracing and reassuring closure around something and the caption expresses this with the words 'All around you.'

Durkheim, with his well-known distinction between societies of mechanical and organic solidarity (1977 [1893]) had already analysed the consequences of the birth of the division of labour in the simple ancient societies: initially the components of a community shared knowledge, beliefs and values completely; everyone knew what others knew. Later, the new condition of social distribution of knowledge broke the original cohesion and unity of views. One of the perverse effects of this was, in his terms, the 'dangerous cult of the individual.'

Contrary to this, another image, which promotes sports shoes, expresses claims of solidarity and pacifism embodied in a young man who offers a flower to soldiers with helmets and rifles at the ready. And indeed these are aspirations held by large groups in our society.

Some adverts emphasise the Eurocentric features, in appearance and in attitudes, of the women and men depicted; others instead present as being attractive blends of ethnic groupings, cultures, customs and practices.

Also the aspiration towards success, mentioned above, has been contrasted, according to some research carried out at the end of the 1970s, by the diffusion of *postmaterialist values* (Inglehart, 1983 [1977]), known as the 'silent revolution.'

With regard to this specific phenomenon of modern society, Weber had spoken of the *polytheism of values* and Simmel (1890/1982) had analysed the psychological consequences of individualism, the result of social and cultural differentiation: he described the metropolitan human being as being characterized by multiple affiliations, sometimes contradictory, continually a migrant from one world to another (we may think, for example, of a captain of industry who practices yoga meditation, does voluntary work, frequents a sailing club, and more), and with the opportunity of exercising choice and enjoying knowledge to a greater degree than an ordinary person: he or she is

part of several ‘social worlds’ (Strauss, 2015)²² and his or her behaviour may be governed by differing ‘dimensions of values’ (Marradi, 2005: 20).

Thus a further result that emerges from analysis of this type of document is that contemporary societies are perhaps characterized, much more so than in previous epochs, by complexity, cultural pluralism, value systems that are not always coherent among themselves.

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²² Perrotta (2009) notes that the concept of *reference group* accommodates the need to consider the multiplicities of possible values and models in a pluralistic society and helps in grasping the origin of orientations that differ from those that are generally shared.

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