

2.3. Punk representations in advertising: impurity, stigma and deviance

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Abstract

Advertising is an important space for social representation of contemporaneity. After all, if we live in a “society of consumption”, advertising is its most important narrative. Through advertising, we can comprehend the hegemonic values of contemporary social life, those which guide everyday life, and the interaction established by common sense. Moreover, because it is public and collective, advertising narrative is concentrated on what we recognize as familiar, and what we perceive as being normative. The aim of this study is to analyze the social representations in advertising, those which we do not know, are unusual or deviant. How does advertising concur with what is not beautiful or “normal”, within the normative and hegemonic patterns present in the media? What are the symbolic limits of a narrative based upon the representations of a “perfect world”, of a “happy ending” and of beauty? This study will focus on British and Brazilian advertising, more specifically those which aim to construct social representations of youth countercultures and subcultures. The main conceptual framework applied was Serge Moscovici’s Theory of Social Representation, and also work by leading Social Scientists Mary Douglas, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, which look at issues such as impurity, stigma and deviance respectively. We intend to reflect on the role of the media in the imaginary construction of what is not exactly the “perfect world” portrayed by advertising.

Keywords: advertising, youth, punk.

Introduction

Since 2011, I have focused my research on the broader aim of exploring the different media representations of youth in advertising, from the 1960s until present day. I believe this is a means through which we can have access to the social construction process of youth, from a historical and sociological perspective.

If on the one hand the complexity of this aim imposes the need to delimit the research scope significantly, a task which isn’t necessarily simple to do, on the other hand, the variety of subjects correlated to the youth universe offer various possibilities for analysis, raising moreover many interesting questions to be considered. For example, we can consider the young and idealised body, consumption and its unfolding in the generational experience, use of technology and the relationship with politics to name but a few. At present, I am most interested in observing the ways in which certain youth subcultures are appropriated by advertising, becoming media representations easily understood by common sense.

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Conceptual Framework

Henceforth, this paper stems from the premise that in the field of communication studies, advertising and its narrative play a role in the everyday elaboration of social representations; the circulating meanings which constitute the imaginary institution of society, and upon which, as a consequence, certain prevailing moral values are imposed. Thus far, nothing new. Therefore I propose a different point of view, one which observes what exists on the fringes of social standards, what transgresses, which to a certain extent represents danger to what is normative. By

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exploring these media representations as a communication phenomenon, more specifically analysing the way in which the construction process of these images, ideas, beliefs, consumption practices thought categories and classification systems occur, I seek to observe what doesn't necessarily fit into what could be considered the norm, conventional or at best agreeable, for an advertising campaign.

How does advertising concur with what is not beautiful or "normal", within the normative and hegemonic patterns present in the media? What are the symbolic limits of a narrative based upon the representations of a "perfect world", of a "happy ending" and of beauty? According to Brazilian anthropologist Everardo Rocha,

There is an amazing curiosity and a great fascination with the world of advertising. The world that we are shown within each and every ad. The world where products are feelings and there is no death. Which is like the life and yet completely different, given that it is always successful. It is where the everyday life is made into small pictures of absolute and impossible happiness. It is where there is no pain, no misery, no distress or issues. It is the world where there are living things and paradoxically also where it is the absence of human fragility. There, in the ad world, the child is always smiling, the woman desiring, the man fulfilling, the old age canonizing. There are always the plentyfull table, the holy family, the seduction. The world is neither deceptive nor truthful just because its registry is magic. (ROCHA, 2010)²

Considering the limitations of this perspective, the one of the perfect and magical "world of advertising", since it may not be a general condition of all cultures, we can at least admit that, for the present analysis, this idealized and aspirational notion is still very useful.³ Moreover, the adverts that will be further described are not concentrated in a specific context. On the contrary, this study will focus on advertising of many countries, emphasizing their character of construction of social representations of youth countercultures and, in this case, punk subcultures in a wider approach.

The main conceptual framework applied was Serge Moscovici's Theory of Social Representation, and also work by leading Social Scientists Mary Douglas, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker, which look at issues such as impurity, stigma and deviance respectively.

I will begin by briefly presenting the four theoretical concepts which serve as a basis for my analysis. I will then show you some advertisements which portray the punk subculture as a media representation which sometimes represents negative values, and sometimes represents positive values. It isn't easy to portray this, particularly if compared to other subcultures, as I will try to demonstrate further on.

Serge Moscovici's Theory of Social Representation is interesting for the purpose of my studies, because in a very simple way, it enables one to reflect on the role of the media in constructing images and ideas which constitute the content of common sense. Particularly if what is proposed, is to observe, within the realm of advertising, what is represented as being conventional, without being conventional; as something familiar, when little is known about it; as inoffensive, when in actual fact it is avoided at all cost. Considering how the media represent something which isn't common, it is interesting to note what happens when there is the obligation of conferring meaning to something which isn't desired for conviviality.

This can be manifested empirically when something that isn't agreeable to social harmony, begins to be represented in advertising, a space which by definition is one of consensus (Figure 1). Moscovici is a theorist who draws upon the Theory of Communication, because he places the media at the centre of what he himself denominates the "phenomenon of social representations". Being a phenomenon, it is the product and effect of social interaction, to which media references contribute. Moscovici's main idea is that social representations are built via social interaction, collective action resulting from necessity and the collective need "making the familiar unfamiliar, or familiarity itself" (Moscovici, 2011, p. 54). For Moscovici, there is a "consensual universe" which provides a type of security and harmony of ideas and knowledge, which are consolidated with the repetition of situations, actions and ideas. Moscovici's contribution lies mainly within the perspective of a social representation which is built collectively, from different spaces within the everyday world, including that of the media; cementing what is social, reaffirming the force of memory, seeking familiarity and stimulated by the moment. Even if the unfamiliar resists, albeit momentarily against what is at stake - to then be modified, brought closer, identified and finally won over by the necessities of the consensual universe.

² All references are taken from Brazilian editions, in Portuguese. And all the citations are free translations by the author.

³ The next step of the present research is to contextualize British and Brazilian cultures in order to establish where or not advertising works like an idealized world.

A second important concept for this analysis is that of Mary Douglas' "impurity" and taking one step further, that of "danger". In 1966, British anthropologist Mary Douglas assessed pure and impure religious rituals in tribal societies, seeking a social law that would elucidate the social contemporary aspects of pollution and contamination, and their relationship with the sacred and profane. In her theory, Douglas (1991) states that the nature of what is dirt, stemming from the analysis of religious rituals, is associated with disorder, or something that is "out of place", that was "rejected" or is "fragmented", threatening "the order of things" (Figure 2).

As a structuralist, Douglas enumerates and describes classification systems in many of her studies. In *Purity and Danger*, the author establishes relationships between the notions presented, as she does with the idea of "holiness" which in her view associates itself to categories such as "purity", "integrity" and "order". In opposition to this, the profane is associated with "dirt", "pollution" and "disorder". For Douglas a "reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death (Douglas, 1991, p. 18)". In her studies, she builds relations between religious symbolism and power. If on the one hand the rituals serve to mark the pure and impure spaces, hygiene and pollution, order and disorder, on the other hand, these demarcations are put into practice by those who detain power. The "dangers" which Douglas refers to are sanctions imposed on those who transgress social rules, rules which are necessary to maintain order, notwithstanding the threat they pose; a threat which in actual fact is borderline between what separates order from disorder.

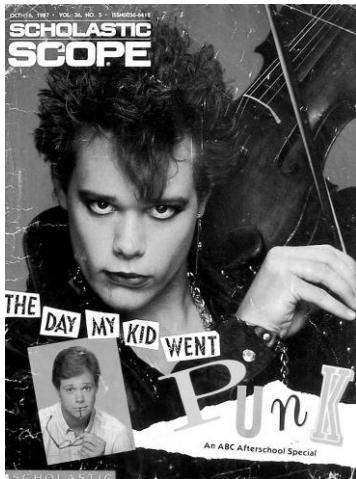


Figure 1 – Punk becoming entertainment (TV Series "The day my kid went punk" exhibited at ABC in 1987, USA)
Source: Scholastic Scope, 10-16-1987

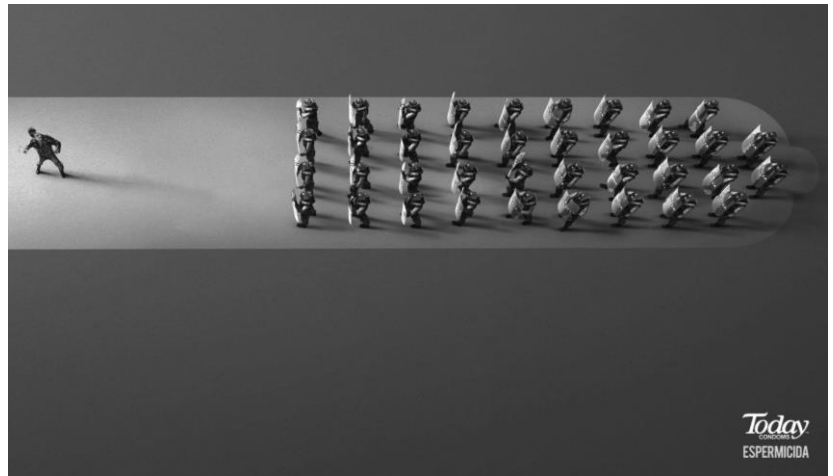


Figure 2 – An advert for condoms– punk threatening the order of things (Colombia, 2010)
Source: <http://www.vivelapub.fr/les-punks-dans-la-pub/>



Figure 3: Punk as impurity, anomaly and danger (Belgium, 2009)
Source: <http://www.vivelapub.fr/les-punks-dans-la-pub/>

In analogy to impurity and disorder are "anomaly" and "ambiguity", which in Douglas' opinion are a repository for danger in any society. In some tribes studied in her fieldwork, creepy crawly animals, or those with some type of physical deformity, were avoided and constituted taboo. Symbolically speaking, and thinking from the perspective of social representations in the media, the same effect seems true, in particular if we make use of the clarity and objectivity used in advertising: nothing that is ambiguous fits into its narrative, let alone something which causes aversion or repulsion. Ambiguity and anomaly represent danger because they challenge form, within the notions of form and the absence of form in society. This is useful notion for when we consider punk representations (Figure 3). In summary, our behaviour towards pollution consists in "condoning any object or any idea susceptible to causing confusion or contradicting our precious classifications" (Douglas, 1991, p. 51).

The third concept was developed by Erving Goffman (2008), for whom studies on stigmas - physical disabilities, marks on bodies or any other situation which resulted in an individual not being fully socially acceptable - enable the comprehension of certain aspects related to interaction and social control (Figure 4).

Goffman makes a distinction between "normal" and "stigmatised". In this sense, the author highlights a number of nuances depending on the context under consideration. For example there is the "credit" or "discredit" factor which is attributed to individuals on a social level; or visible stigmas which determine the conditions of the "discredited", or those which are not visible, which determine the conditions of the "discreditable". There is also the "manipulation" or "covering up" stigma depending on contextual losses or gains for the stigmatised. Considering Goffman's theories, what interests us the most is what the author refers to as "symbols". There are three kinds: the "stigma symbols" in opposition to the "prestige symbols" (Figure 4).

By "stigma symbols" the author refers to "symbols which are particularly effective in calling attention to a degrading identity discrepancy that rupture, what could otherwise be, a coherent global portrait" (Goffman, 1988, p. 53). The third kind are the "disidentifiers", in other words those which promote the rupture of expectations with regards to social information, which is used by the individual in a positive way.

And finally the fourth concept, "deviance", devised by American sociologist Howard Becker (2009). In 1962, Becker made contributions in the field of behaviour which was considered to be in breach of established norms, and therefore subject to sanctions imposed by social institutions and organisations. Becker was not interested in understanding what led an individual to transgressing the norms. He sought to observe the process through which this individual was "labelled" a "deviant". The author applies the term "outsiders" to all of those whom commit infractions of social rules, ranging from infractions considered serious such as related to a criminal act, through to transgressions of conventions established by etiquette (Figure 5).

The outsiders are labelled by the more conventional members of society, those who stipulate social rules for their own benefit, maintaining those who transgress the rules, on the fringes of society. It is important that these deviants exist, because the sanctions they suffer are recognised by the "more conventional members of society" as being fair. Therefore strengthening this labelling factor ensures social order.

The four concepts hereby presented help us to understand media representations of the punk subculture in the sense that it is "unfamiliar", "dirty" or "dangerous", "stigmatised" and that of an "outsider". When punk is used in advertising, it strengthens the opposite, in other words what is "familiar", "pure" or "sacred", what is "normal" and the "more conventional members of society". Different from other subcultures such as hippie, punk is a "necessary evil" to ascertain moral and normative values in our society (Figure 6).

Even though transgressional punk expressions are radically opposed to authoritarianism, to bureaucratisation and bourgeois consumption, because of the differences in harmonization present in the day-to-day of social groups, it needs to be incorporated into common sense. It has to become "familiar". Advertising is the ideal space for this process to occur, because, in there, we expect to see a "perfect world", free from ambiguities and anomalies, contrary to what it actually is. By playing with danger, advertising risks illustrating the best side of what threatens it. Therefore the punk movement, even though it is much more hostile to the advertising environment than the hippie movement, can also be the object of persuasive argumentation - neutralising it as being dangerous (Figure 7).

Punk serves as an inspiration because it offers the necessary symbology that shocks the state-of-play, but the moment it becomes associated with positive values such as authenticity, longevity, change, modernity, urbanity, it enters the advertising realm as an inoffensive outsider.

Conclusion

To conclude, advertising is a space in which to negotiate meanings, and in this dynamic, the most diverse social forces are at play. What this study sought to highlight was that of social control. In analysing punk media representation in advertising, we can understand the cultural limits that are behind the discourse that should bring wellbeing.



Figure 4 – Peanuts and Snoopy using punk symbols, disidentifiers (Germany, 2007)

Source: <http://www.vivelapub.fr/les-punks-dans-la-pub/>



Figure 5 – The deviant punk old lady (Serbia, 2013)

Source: <http://www.gutewerbung.net/duracell-punk-hippie/>



Figure 6 – A Brazilian advert for matchboxes – “For the new fire-worshippers” (Brazil, 1970)

Source: *Veja Magazine*, 08-12-1970



Figure 7 – Punk in advertising, the inoffensive outsider (USA, 2013)

Source: http://mondomoda.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/playtex_punk_girl.jpg

A total of seven images have been presented, six of which are adverts, representing punk as something is “unfamiliar” (Moscovici, 2011), but modified for the benefits of the brands and products being marketed. The first image (Figure 1) is the cover of a magazine, advertising a TV show called *The day my kid went punk* which was aired as part of the ABC Afterschool Specials (USA, 1987) programme. Although this series was aired almost ten years after the “end” of the worldwide punk movement, it indicates that, at that point, common sense could possibly admit the presence of a punk individual as part of a traditional north-american family. The second image

is an advert for a condom brand (Figure 2) that illustrates one sole punk individual who appears to be throwing something against an army of 38 men. This is an image of opposition between the good and the bad, the “other” and us, punk and society – this punk guy represents danger because in the words of Mary Douglas (1991), he is “out of order”. The same idea is perhaps more clear in Figure 3, an advert for Senior Self -Defence. Punk is featured as a strange, ugly, dirty and humiliated guy, who was holding a razorblade, which we assume was to be used to attack somebody, but instead he is defeated, lying on the floor and severely injured, most likely by an old man. The fourth image is an advert for Volkswagen, with Peanuts and Snoopy in Mohican haircuts smiling at each other. This is a very representative punk symbol from Erving Goffmans’ (2008) Stigma Theory. We can think of Figure 4 as being an expression of what the author calls a “desidentifier”, since the Mohican haircut isn’t used as a “stigma symbol” as expected, but instead as a symbol of a good wilderness, as stated in the slogan . Here, we can understand how advertising brings positive values to something as hostile as punk, in order to benefit the brand. In the Duracell advert (Figure 5), the punk old lady with her tattoo, piercing and shaggy hair is an outsider, as denominated by Howard Becker (2009), who transgresses the conventions of how an old lady must look or behave, emphasising, by contrast, what is normative. Punk, as per this advert, is as old as she is, but never dies, just like the battery we are being enticed to buy. Comparing punk to other subcultures such as the hippie subculture, punk is significantly more rude and difficult to be featured. In Figure 6, we can see an advert for matchboxes where the hippie lifestyle is portrayed in a charming way, and the members of this subculture are mysterious “fire-worshippers”: their outsidersness is much more familiar than that one of punk. And, finally, in the last advert for Playtex (Figure 7), the beautiful little girl is “difficult”, as stated in the slogan, but not ugly, dirty or threatening as the other examples shown. She is the inoffensive outsider, or, in other words, as far as advertising can go when dealing with the unfamiliar, what is impure, stigma and deviance. Nonetheless, sometimes what is forbidden, is extremely attractive. Therefore in the name of creativity, it is worth taking risks, even if it means occupying territory which borderlines contradicting capitalist systems, consumption and structures of power that sustain it.

Funding: This work was supported by CNPq (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico - National Counsel of Technological and Scientific Development) under Grant 408873/2013-2.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the Dean of the division of the Social Sciences Office, PUC –Rio, for all the support given to this work.

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