The power of compliments: A socio-linguistic view into social advertisement

With the accent of information and communication technology tools of the 21st century, consumption has been under a strong influence of globalization processes, changing communication systems, and developing the spending power of both businesses and individuals. Because of an easy access to communication tools and information, the consumer spending power strengthens and their attitudes and opinions gain voice. At the same time, a pressure on business subject to take over their responsibility share in helping to resolve social problems amplifies. Marketing practices have striven to recognize these changing rules with adjusted advertising strategies. Reflecting the new role distribution of the market, a strategy shift from product oriented campaigns to consumer value recognition can be observed, especially through social advertisement campaigns. The purpose of this paper is to provide an alternative, sociolinguistic perspective into the psychology of the consumer by analyzing cases of successful marketing communication that aim at the consumer values rather than at the brand or product. Particularly, campaigns adopting the format of compliments in their advertising messages were identified and analyzed, to point out the potential of this communication format. Being strongly personal and value oriented with a positive charge in its nature, compliments amplify their potent communication power aimed at the recognition of the consumer in the modern times. Adopting a detailed content analysis, the study brings a unique, multidisciplinary perspective to the understanding of marketing communication of the modern times.

1 Introduction

The rise of personal computers in the 1980’s, the internet in the 1990’s and social media in the early 21st century, brought along changing communication systems. Once a distant world speeds up and shrinks, people’s attitudes and opinions gain on importance, the power of leaders weakens while the masses win over voice. These phenomena accelerate the globalization processes and, inevitably, result in changing patterns of consumer behavior and perceptions. Consumers and their willingness to accept new products or trends tend to be guided by their own will. Marketing practices have striven to reflect the renewed reality and adjust to the changing rules for advertising strategies. Globalization has been linked with intensified consumerist tendencies coherent with a growing spending power of both businesses and individuals. This, as de Mooij and Hofstede point out, results in a gradual “convergence of income, media and technology” (de Mooij and Hofstede 2002, p. 61). Based on this premise, professionals debate the potential impacts on the consumption patterns. Will the convergence trends “lead to homogenous consumer needs, tastes and lifestyle” as anticipated by Assael (1998), Bullmore (2000), or Czinkota and Ronkainen (1993), or will the consumer behavior become more heterogeneous and the manifestation of value differences stronger, as proposed by Levitt (1988), Murphy (1999), Drucker (1999), de Mooij and Hofstede (2002), or Keane and Wasi (2012).
For a long time, the goal of advertising has been to promote a specific product to a targeted audience through varied advertising techniques: ‘informative advertising’ that provides basic information about a product; ‘persuasive advertising’ that uses coercive appeals to increase the demand to purchase a product; ‘comparative advertising’ that adopts direct comparisons between the company product and its competition; or ‘reminder advertising’ which reinforces previous promotional activity of a product. The center of attention of these advertising formats used to be a focus on product with an accent on its characteristics, specifics, advantages, qualities or effects. All these strategies have built on the assumption that the consumer behavior is rational, meaning that consumers form their preferences and make their individual purchasing decisions to maximize quality and minimize price.

Recently, however, a qualitative change in the promotional activities can be observed. While experiencing that the consumers “are often not rational and do not make purchase decisions that maximize utility” (de Mooij and Hofstede 2002, p. 61), that is, less emphasis is placed on real attributes, many advertisers see their consumers to appreciate social advertising campaigns with messages of an educational or philanthropic content (Lee and Kotler 2012) or those pointing out various social issues (Bovée and Arens 1992, p. 662, Banyte, Paskeviciute and Rutelione 2014, p. 12, French 2010). This is based on the premise that “many of consumers’ motives for their purchase decisions are emotional, and their feelings about a brand can be more important than knowledge of its features or attributes” (Belch and Belch 2004, p. 276).

This indicates that, instead of converging their values, consumers may react to globalization through resisting the homogeneity. It was Drucker who proposed that in the 21st century business practices, what will really matter is not the product and its attributes but the consumer values (1999).

2 The compliment paradigm

Values, as de Mooij reiterates, “offer an opportunity to differentiate brands by going beyond a focus on attributes and benefits or the deliverance of higher-level consequences to consumers”. They have a potential to create association networks that distinguish the brand from the competition and help build strong positions (2005, p. 97). To demonstrate the interactional force of consumer values, advertising messages in the format of compliments has been chosen. The study suggests that the potential of compliments as an advertising feature has far not been utilized in promotional practices, and if they were, they met with noticeable success.

Compliments represent an individual value oriented communication act that “aims to impress and/or please our addressees by amplifying their qualities” (Válková 2012, p. 43). Literature describes compliments as “intended by the speaker” and “meant to please the addressee” (Mustapha 2012, p. 228), their functions are to manifest solidarity, understanding or accord (Golato 2005, Holmes 1988, Manes and Wolfson 2011). Being distinguished as “expressions of positive evaluations”, such as praise, admiration and respect (Manes and Wolfson 2011, p. 116), compliments are a common and an important part of everyday social life.

To grasp the power of a compliment as an advertising strategy, it is important to understand compliment as a speech act with a specific cultural, social and psychological dynamics. In human interaction, compliments are conceived as an interaction between a speaker and an addressee which implies a paired sequence (Heritage and Atkinson 1984), meaning that a response is expected. However, different cultures have varied norms, different situations have a varied context and different individualities may have different level of sensitiveness to the face concerns and react to compliments with a varied degree of imposition (Spencer-Oatey 2000). Orrechioni (1996) defines compliments as positive feeling evoking acts. Brown and Levinson (1978), on the other hand, consider compliments as a potential face threatening act, since culture, personality and context-related feelings of possible obligation, gratitude, engagement or embarrassment may create a varied force of stress. For example, the addressee may predicate a speaker’s desire of unexpressed want
and may feel pressure to provide a context-relevant response. In some cultures, compliments are paid more frequently than in others, and their acceptance and responses range between confident (acceptance/agreement, expression of gratitude) and modest (acceptance with amendment, no acknowledgement or an explicit denial) (Pomerantz 1978, Wolfson 1979). Therefore, it may be the problematic paired culture-burdened dynamics that makes compliments rarely used in advertisement in most of the countries.

The use of compliments in advertising, however, enacts different dynamics between the marketer and the consumer. As the targeted audience is spared of the imposition to react face-to-face, that is, to deliver a response, this decreases its face threatening force. What is more, being strongly personal and value oriented with a positive charge in its nature, it amplifies its potent communication power aimed at the consumer of the modern times. This paper demonstrates the potential of compliments as a powerful marketing communication format through an analysis of selected advertising practices that used compliments as a tool to communicate their brand and products to the consumers and, unsurprisingly, met with a significant success.

3 Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to contribute with a sociolinguistic perspective into the psychology of the modern consumer as an alternative to conventional analytical approaches to marketing communication. To identify advertising strategies that would resonate with the emerging times, cases of successful marketing communication that aim at the consumer values rather than at the brand or product are identified and submitted to a content analysis. The center of attention are campaigns that formulate their advertising messages in the format of compliments, an individual value oriented speech act that well demonstrates the interactional force of consumer values. Compared to advertising messages featured as a speech act of an offer, suggestion or an invitation, compliments are by far not a frequently used feature in marketing communication, nor have they been analyzed for its potential in marketing. Three promotional practices sharing mutual attributes to comparison were identified and submitted to analysis. All three samples are created in a video commercial format and distributed through the TV and the social media communication channels. They all represent a commercial subject, namely the Apple, Dove and Always brands. They all classify as a social advertisement as they were part of a larger campaign aiming to address a social issue. And they all adopted the format of a compliment in formulating their message to the consumers. Finally, positive reactions were recorded in increased social media reactions and sales, and in reception of prestigious professional awards.

Each of the video commercials was transcribed for a content analysis. Features defining compliments were identified from the script, such as expressions of positive evaluations that amplify qualities, show praise, admiration or respect, as well as manifestations of solidarity, understanding or accord. The function of each compliment was analyzed to identify the targeted social aspect. Lastly, both general and professional public reactions were researched to evaluate the degree of the commercial or its related campaign impact.

4 Sample analyses

4.1 Sample one: To the crazy ones

The first sample used for analysis is the Apple company’s commercial “To the crazy ones” that launched the company’s “Think different” campaign in 1997. The main author of the text was the creative director Rob Siltanen, a few contributions were also made by Lee Clow and other company team members (Siltanen 2011). The content of the text pinpoints individual human differences as
valuable contributions to change or form a society as seen in the following script:

"Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The trouble-makers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status-quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify, or vilify them. But the only thing you can’t do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

It can be seen that while acknowledging personal characteristics normatively seen as divergent or problematic (e.g., crazy, misfits, rebels, trouble-makers, rule-breakers, without respect), these are used to express solidarity, understanding or accord (“while some may see them as the crazy ones”). At the same time, these acknowledgements preface the expression of positive evaluations, such as admiration or respect (“because they change things”, “they push the human race forward”, “I see genius”, “the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do”). Seen from this perspective, the message serves as a compliment with a profound value-oriented charge. It grants a wide range of the audience on individual bases, since it opens a large space for everyone to find him- or herself in it and feel to be understood. In sum, the commercial approaches its audience not as a homogenous mass but acknowledges the positive contribution of varied individual characteristics and values.

The power of the compliment paid to its potential consumers as an advertising strategy, can be seen in the reception of the commercial upon its release. The “Think Different” campaign resulted in being an enormous success winning the company a number of awards including the 1998 Emmy Award for Best Commercial and the 2000 Grand Effie Award for most effective campaign in America. Various business specialists also saw the launch of this commercial as a breakthrough point in the promotion of the company and its products, as it contributed to the brand re-emergence, restoring its image after Apple was losing the market share to other companies at that time (Deutschman 2000, Bilton 2011, Adonai 2013). It is needless to say that being one of the first of this type, the commercial reveals the marketing genius of Steve Jobs and his team being able to recognize the changing consumer values and react to the accent of the globalization trends emanating the “new commercial reality” (Lewitt 1983).

4.2 Sample two: Dove real beauty sketches

The second sample is the “Dove Real Beauty Sketches” video from 2013 as part of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. Conducted by the Unilever’s Dove brand since 2005, the campaign reacts to the market research results indicating that only 4% of women perceive themselves as beautiful while the majority is hypercritical to their looks (Vega 2013). The analyzed video with a leading slogan “You are more beautiful than you think” was produced by the Ogilvy & Mather ad agency with the aim to raise awareness to the tendency of being too concerned with one’s appearance by accentuating natural beauty.

In this video, several women describe themselves for a sketch to a forensic artist hid behind a curtain while the woman and the artist cannot see each other. The same women are then described by stranger women whom they met the day before. After that, the women are shown both sketches for comparison. Although designed as an experiment, the video discloses an expected outcome. The self-descriptions as considerably more critical or negative (“my mom told me I had a big jaw”, “when like I smile I feel just like [my chin] kinda protrudes a little bit”, “I kinda have a fat rounder face”, “the older I’ve gotten the more freckles I’ve gotten” ...) than those provided by the strangers (“she was thin”, “her chin was a nice thin chin”, “scars ... were describing just a normal beautiful person”, “she had nice eyes they lit up when she spoke and were very expressive”, “she had blue eyes, very nice blue eyes”). The contrast is then realized by the women themselves in the video (“the stranger’s was a little more like gentle. It’s really different, which is very strange”, “she looks closed off and fatter, she just looks kinda shut down, sadder too, the second one is more beautiful”, “she looks
more open and friendly and happy”, “like a happy, light, much younger, much brighter person”). The video leads to the grand slogan of the commercial: “You are more beautiful than you think”. Compliments play a paramount role in this video. Upon the prevalently critical self-descriptions, the first compliment featured sequences come as positive evaluations given from the stranger women. Even though their sincerity may be questioned as they may be meant to be polite, please or show solidarity, and even slightly manipulated by the artist’s question formulations, their undoubted content is to accentuate the qualities in appearances or even to see imperfections from a positive angle. The strong contrast in evaluations for the two sketches yields further series of self-compliments, some being the women’s corrected positive evaluations of their own appearance, other following as a solicited agreement to the artist’s final question „Do you think you are more beautiful than you say?“ Being a reiteration of the artist question, the commercial leading slogan then, is a compliment transferred to the wide range of consumers acknowledging the existence of natural positive qualities in each individual. The message, like the previous sample, celebrates individual differences of its audience rather than a unified model of beauty.

The power of the compliment as a potent marketing strategy can be found in the vivid reactions to the video. Upon its online release, more than 15 million people saw the video within a week through various social-media networks (Grose 2013) creating a viral sensation. The emotional nature of the content can be observed in the personal and rather mixed reactions of the critics. Katy Young in the The Daily Telegraph called it Dove’s “most thought provoking film yet” for its “moving, eye opening and in some ways saddening” (2013) character. Rebecca Cullers from Adweek classifies the commercial as “one of the most original and touching experiments” (2013) while Emma Gray in the Huffington Post admits that this “message rings true and is a refreshing departure from the many female-targeted ads that try to shame women into buying things” (2013). Some even acknowledge that the video brought tears to their eyes (Vega 2013). Avi Dan from Forbes, on the other hand, sees the message as “powerful”, but still “focused too much on appearance” (2013), as well as others object against the experiment as “tainted” and not scientifically valid for a purposeful selection of the participating women (Postrel 2013, Griner 2013). Despite the criticism and opposing sentiments, the marketing effect of the commercial reflected in the company improved image and results. The campaign won a number of awards (19 including Titanium Grand Prix award at Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity in 2013, top price at Effie Award 2014), and the company sales reportedly increased by approximately 40% (Skene 2014).

The personal character of the compliment as a powerful promoting technique dwells in the value-oriented nature of the speech act. Reflecting Anselmo Ramos, the head of the Real Beauty project, who claims that “most ads today don’t evoke any clear emotion, they just communicate a particular product or service benefit” (Grose 2013), the Dove commercial seems to suit well the desire of the modern time consumer. It reinforces confidence and self-esteem or, as Vega puts it, “hits on a real human truth for women” (2013). Emanating diverging values in a converging globalized world is nicely reflected in Culler’s remark: “like all of the best work, the commercial elements are barely there. Beyond the logo, Dove doesn’t even attempt to sell soap” (Cullers 2013). This reiterates the above mentioned Drucker’s claim that what really matters nowadays is not the product and its attributes but the consumer values (1999). Compliment in its nature seems to have done the right work for recognizing the consumer varied qualities and their individualized values and needs.

### 4.3 Sample three: Always #LikeAGirl

The last analyzed sample is the Procter & Gamble campaign “Always #LikeAGirl” from 2013. Its author, the award-winning filmmaker Lauren Greenfield, designed the video to help the company empower females and address what Always calls a “the self-esteem crisis” among young girls (Goldberg 2014). The idea is based on the American Psychological Association research results showing that the girls’ self-esteem drops twice as much than boys’ during puberty (Robins et al. 2002). As part of a larger campaign, a series of further videos were released with the ambition to
“rewrite the rules and keep girls in sports” (always.com 2017).

In the beginning of the analyzed video, several adult women and a little brother are asked to act out what it means to them “to do something ‘like a girl’”. While showing how they see women run, fight and throw, a variety of fake affectionate and weak hand and leg movements, pretended flipping hair, or giggles are shown by the participants. The same question is then posed to younger pre-pubescent girls who, unlike the others, perform genuine efforts in natural, self-confident performance prone to stereotypes as they „act out athletic and deliberate motions” (Goldberg 2014). The others are then asked for their reflection which results in realization of their hypercritical judgements and corrected views.

In the beginning, the video shows the phrase ‘Like a girl’ being treated as an insult, but as it progresses, at sends an altered message, that is, to deliver women a compliment. As the company puts it, the main goal was to start showing young girls that “doing it #LikeAGirl is an awesome thing” (always.com, 2017), in other words, to accentuate admiration and respect for women’s qualities and potential in sports. This is formulated by one of the women participants at the end: “if you are still scoring, ... you’re still being first, you’re doing it right”. Being asked to provide advice to young girls, this woman prompts them with a positive evaluation: „keep doing it because it’s working”. As a manifestation of solidarity and understanding, she adds: “If somebody else says that running like a girl or kicking like a girl or shooting like a girl is something you shouldn’t be doing, it’s their problem”. To boost self-confidence, then, she concludes: „yes, I kick like a girl, I swim like a girl and I walk like a girl and I wake up in the morning like a girl because I am a girl and that’s not something that I should be ashamed of”.

Along with an immediate viral effect confirming the company gained interest of a large market world-wide (Kimberley 2014), the campaign won the PR Grand Prix award at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity in 2015 followed by the Creative Arts 2015 Emmy Award. Its success initiated a professional debate about the current time advertising trends. And it is the nature of the compliment act that may provide the answer to the question PR professionals posed when searching for the formula that wins the festival top prizes. Lynne Anne Davis, the PR jury president explains that the current committee strategy is to prioritize the effect in the strategy planning, that is, whether there is a “measurable change in behavior, lives, policies and societies” (Bruell 2015). And indeed, based on the overall results, professionals agreed that this campaign did achieve its goal to “completely redefine the phrase ‘like a girl’” (Goldberg 2014). As Davis continued, while the commercial “didn’t just speak to girls..., it hit a chord with everyone: women, mothers, fathers, and it spoke to every single culture [and told] a cultural truth that transcends boundaries” by addressing the individuals’ “self-esteem issues”. Again, it seems to be the personal feeling and value oriented content of the message as well as the recognition of natural human qualities that targeted the audience of this commercial.

5 Conclusion

The analyses above show compliments as a potent advertisement strategy reflecting the character of modern times. Compliments are a personal feeling and value oriented, have a positive force and touch individual people’s emotions. At the same time, when used in advertisement, they do not carry the conversational burden. Their audience, hidden in a public space, is void of the commitment to provide a socially, culturally or context relevant response. Compliments allow the consumers to enjoy a moment of recognition and fame.

Neither of the analyzed commercials, as presented in the video shots, utilizes the traditional commercial elements such as a promotion of their product accentuating the product attributes, that is, its characteristics or benefits. Rather, they aim at human values as they communicate admiration and respect, provide positive evaluations, accentuate human qualities, recognize potential in people, or manifest solidarity and understanding with the consumer. Although it can be argued that they aim
at creating a company image, they take upon further ambitions. They may educate, help or address pending selected social issues, as shown in all three analyzed examples. One celebrates individual differences, creativity and originality in solutions while challenging the ostracism of mainstream; another accentuates women’s natural beauty to change their hyper-critical self-evaluations and boost self-esteem; and the other fights gender stereotypes to boost young girls’ drop in self-confidence during the critical age of puberty.

This study suggests that compliments, while allowing to recognize individual values, are an advertising format that resonates with the current time consumption divergence trends. Considering Hofstede and de Mooij’s argument that “when income levels are such that consumers have satisfied their basic needs and wants, they will spend their discretionary income on what best fits their value systems” (2002, p. 67), compliments offer a direction for promotional activities at the time of globalization. This study shows that with the converging income, media and technology, people are willing to choose for telecommunication, cosmetics or personal hygiene products of a higher standard when the brand communication style succeeds to recognize their feelings, needs and value systems.

Showing the dynamics of compliments in advertisement, the hypothesis of the converging consumption patterns can, in the end, be genuinely challenged. As there seems to be “no empirical evidence that consumption behaviors are converging” (Murphy 1999), the homogeneity in consumer values can be, as de Mooij and Hofstede put it, considered as “merely a persistent myth” (2002, p.62). It is the opposite reality of a diverging consumption behavior that needs to be taken into account when developing advertising strategies. Consumer value systems appear to be heterogeneous. Consumers expect their distinct feelings, wants and needs to be acknowledged. They long to be understood and involved. And they expect commercial activities to have a tangible impact in resolving their social issues. Compliments show to be one of the potent techniques to meet the complexity of these criteria.

5.1 Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study, being rather descriptive in nature, focused on content analysis of selected advertisements that defined as the speech act of a compliment, that is, carried the format of given linguistic and pragmatic features. Received awards and results from open databases were used to demonstrate the success of each campaign and only suggest the potential of compliment for marketing and advertising. To prove its potential, though, a follow-up qualitative research in the form of surveys, interviews or focus groups with varied targeted market segments would provide more information about the consumer perceptions.

The selected samples for analysis represented three cases adopting compliments in social advertisement. However, further examples of compliments from other brands or companies and using a wider range of media than video can be identified in the market, such as the Nike “Find Your Greatness” campaign accentuating diversity or the L’Oréal “Because You’re Worth It” campaign appealing to the women’s rights movement and its history. Extending a variety of the analyzed samples might provide more findings supporting the hypothesis that compliments in their nature do enhance a more value-oriented communication and positive relationship between the brand or company and the consumer. Samples analyzing compliments in advertisement could also be contrasted with case studies focused on samples that carry offensive messages in advertisement.

Literatúra/List of References

Klúčové slová/Key Words

social advertisement, marketing communication, advertising strategy, campaign

sociálna reklama, marketingová komunikácia, reklamná stratégia, kampaň

JEL klasifikácia/JEL Classification

M31

Résumé

Sila komplimentov: Sociálno-lingvistický pohľad na sociálnu reklamu

S dôrazom na nástroje informačných a komunikačných technológií 21. storočia bola spotreba silne ovplyvnená globalizačnými procesmi, meniacimi sa komunikačnými systémami a rozvíjaním kúpnej sily podnikov aj jednotlivcov. Vzhľadom na ľahký prístup ku komunikačným nástrojom a informáciám posilňuje výdavkovú silu zákazníkov a ich postoje a názory získavajú hlas. Súčasne sa zvyšuje tlak na podnikateľský subjekt, ktorý preberá svoju zodpovednosť pri riešení sociálnych problémov.

Marketingové postupy sa snažia rozpoznať tieto meniace sa pravidlá prispôsobenými reklamnými strategiami. Vzhľadom na novú úlohu distribúcie trhu možno pozorovať prechod od produktovo orientovaných kampaní k uznávaniu hodnoty spotrebitelov, najmä prostredníctvom kampaní sociálnej inzercie. Cieľom tohto článku je poskytnúť alternatívny, sociolingvistický pohľad do psychológie spotrebitelia analyzou prípadov úspešnej marketingovej komunikácie, ktoré sa zameriavajú skôr na spotrebitelské hodnoty ako na značku alebo produkt. Predovšetkým boli identifikované a analyzované kampane, ktoré prijali formát komplimentov vo svojich reklamných správach, aby poukázali na potenciál tohto komunikačného formátu. Byť silne osobný a cenovo orientovaný s pozitívnym nábojom vo svojej podstate, komplimenty rozširujú svoju silnú komunikačnú silu zameranú na rozpoznanie spotrebitela v moderných časoch. Prijatím podrobnej analýzy obsahu prináša štúdia jedinečnú, multidisciplinárnu perspektívu na pochopenie marketingovej komunikácie modernej doby.

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