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How to Befriend an Ad? A Sociolinguistic and Sociocultural Inquiry into Social Media Ads on Facebook

ABSTRAKT

Jak zaprzyjaźnić się z reklamą? Socjolingwistyczne i socjokulturowe spojrzenie na reklamy w mediach społecznościowych na przykładzie Facebooka

W kontekście nowych mediów, wraz z przekształceniem się rynku mediów w główne domeny reklamy i marketingu[1], rola multimodalnych komunikatów reklamowych rysuje się coraz wyraźniej, szczególnie gdy mowa o mediach społecznościowych. Na co dzień nie zdajemy sobie jednak sprawy z wpływu mediów społecznościowych na zmiany w społeczeństwie, języku czy schematach komunikacyjnych; co więcej, rzadko dostrzegamy dystynktywne cechy reklamy w mediach społecznościowych, biorąc je za coś oczywistego. Warto zatem pochylić się nad sposobem, w jaki media społecznościowe wplecione są w tkankę społeczną, jak i nad ich wpływem na współczesne wzorce komunikacyjne. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest socjolingwistyczny i socjokulturowy opis reklamy w mediach społecznościowych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem reklam zamieszczonych na Facebooku, a także przedstawienie ich jako przykładów typowych dla multimodalnego i wizualnego zwrotu w komunikacji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: reklama, media społecznościowe, socjolingwistyka, socjokultura, komunikacja.

Introduction

In new media contexts, as „media markets became the main advertising and marketing environments”[2], the role of multimodal advertising communication is perhaps most evident, especially when it comes to social media. However, little do we realise how social media are changing the society, its language, and communication patterns; furthermore, little do we notice the idiosyncratic

[1] S. Brierley, *The Advertising Handbook*, London and New York 2005, p. 18.
[2] Ibidem, p. 18.

features of social media advertising, taking them for granted. It would therefore be germane to inspect the way in which social media ads are woven into the tissue of contemporary society, as well as the way in which they influence modern communication patterns.

The aim of this paper is to discuss these issues related to social media ads from the sociolinguistic and sociocultural standpoint, with considerable emphasis placed on facebook ads, as well as to present the format they employ as indicative of the contemporary multimodal and visual turn in communication. The interesting peculiarities of both form and content of social media advertising have inspired the author to have a look at the sociocultural and linguistic dimension of facebook ads with a view to establishing a diagnosis of human language and social condition as mediated by new media context.

Defining Social Media and Social Media Ads

It seems suitable to start with the definition and scope of the term under discussion; Oxford dictionary defines „social media" as „websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking"[3]. Therefore, they enable the netters to share information, opinions, and knowledge with potentially unlimited audiences, as well as to connect and communicate with other users easily by means of the World Wide Web. What is more, social networking sites invite more interactivity and engagement on the part of the users owing to their increased activity, which translates into user-generated and/or customised content. Social media consist of social media accounts, groups, fora, blogs and vlogs, videos, pictures, podcasts, and many other forms of users' activity; irrespective of the form, though, the primary function of all social networks boils down to communication – not only between users, but also between users and advertisers.

Blossom offers yet another definition of social media, stating that they can be described as „any highly scalable and accessible communications technology or technique that enables any individual to influence groups of other individuals easily"[4]. In other words, because social networks belong to the realm of mass media, their reach is truly enormous, allowing the advertising agencies to influence numerous prospects simultaneously, almost any time and almost anywhere. New media provide advertisers with more and more opportunities to transmit their advertising messages, opening the channel used for communication, entertainment, and information exchange to advertising

[3] Social media – definition of social media in English by Oxford Dictionaries online.

[4] J. Blossom, *Content Nation. Surviving and Thriving as Social Media Changes Our Work, Our Lives, and Our Future*, Indianapolis 2009, p. 29.

promotion as well. High level of access to modern technologies, along with the popularity of social media, render social networking sites an ideal environment for the dynamic development of internet ads.

„Social media are about people influencing other people in a social situation through technology"[5] so they constitute ideal instruments of influence when it comes to product promotion. Hence, advertising messages, nestled comfortably on facebook, seem to be a great example here, for this particular social medium makes it possible for the users to create accounts, to enter different groups, and to share messages, photos, videos, and events from their lives. Each user can follow real-time updates of the list comprising various items liked, commented on or shared by himself or her friends, with ads resembling ordinary posts woven into the ongoing list. Consequently, the very placement of such ads in social media gives them a *must-read* status[6], requiring constant attention from the netter since, at first glance, it is difficult to distinguish between a post and a sponsored ad until one really looks at it.

Apart from the post-like structure typical of all social-media content, one can enumerate a number of differences that can be identified in „classic" internet banners and ads in social media; first of all, they usually make use of several different types of deployable semiotic codes available in their arsenal, i.e. of verbal, visual, and sometimes even auditory stimuli to convey one message. Social media ads are thus multimodal in structure, simultaneously employing an array of meaningful resources available[7], joining the text in the heading and in the post with emoticons and emoji, supplementing it with short videos, GIF files or boomerang videos combining sequences of photos into moving images in the form of a loop, i.e. played back-and-forth.

The internet environment offers many additional advantages in terms of marketing tools, the most important of which are personalisation and virality. The former is reflected in the users' being free to decide what they want to follow or subscribe to, as well as which content they want to share or post; furthermore, personalised content may also be adjusted to the netter's preferences and tastes detected by the browser on the basis of previous search results. The latter, on the other hand, renders social media ads distinct from their press or TV counterparts due to the fact that they can be circulated from one Internet user to another thanks to liking, sharing, or re-posting; viral content is thus capable of reaching inconceivable numbers of users in a short span of time. Last but not least, social media ads' accessibility is also an important aspect to consider since they are usually displayed on the screens of mobile devices, which means that the

[5] Ibidem, p. 30.
[6] D. Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge and New York 2006, p. 241.
[7] J. Bateman, *Multimodality and Genre. A Foundation for the Systematic Analysis of Multimodal Documents*, New York 2008, p. 1.

advertising content is available whenever people use social media networks.

A Few Words on the Sociocultural Dimension of Social Media Ads

The sociocultural dimension of computer-mediated technologies is also an issue that deserves proper consideration. As various social media, including facebook, are entering and conquering our society, the virtual community grows, at the same time transforming the real one according to the rules of mediatization, which „points to societal changes in contemporary highly modern societies and the role of media and mediated communication in these transformations"[8]. These processes of change, as such, influence many areas of social and cultural life, reshaping and defining cultural contexts anew; referring to a work by Schulz[9], Lundby describes this transformation as follows:

> „Schulz points to four processes of social change where the media play a key role: first, in extension of the natural human communication capacities; second, in partial or complete substitution of social interaction and social institutions (...); third, in the amalgamation where boundaries between mediated and non-mediated activities are dissolved; and finally, accommodation – the changes induced by the mere fact that communication media exist, and so people and institutions have to adapt them"[10].

On the one hand, media-saturated communities can benefit from the new modes of communication available thanks to social-media environments; on the other, mediatization may have an adverse impact on human activities and communication patterns, as one can speculate that contemporary societies may turn to messaging and mediated cognitions or behaviours instead of real-life, face-to-face conversation[11]; as a result, people may fail to fulfil their perceived social needs if they confuse social media with authentic communication[12], thus hampering interpersonal relationships in the long run.

Nowadays, one can easily find himself or herself expanding the circle of friends and acquaintances on facebook for it to include favourite brands and products as well. Media today are all-embracing and so are ads that transform the products and services promoted into social media accounts, enabling one to „befriend" an ad. The constant urge to expand one's circle of „friends", to click and subscribe to

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[8] K. Lundby, *Introduction: „Mediatization" as Key*, [in:] *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences,* K. Lundby (ed.), New York 2009, p. 1.

[9] W. Schulz, *Reconstructing Mediatization as an Analytical Concept* [in:] „European Journal of Communication", 2004, 19 (1), pp. 87-101.

[10] K. Lundby, *Introduction: „Mediatization" as Key*..., op. cit., pp. 10-11.

[11] S. Turkle, *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, New York, 2012.

[12] Z. Wang, J. M. Tchernev, and T. Solloway, *A dynamic longitudinal examination of social media use, needs, and gratifications among college students,* „Computers in Human Behavior", 2012, 28 (5), pp. 1829-1839.

more social media accounts, and hence receive more information may prove detrimental to interpersonal relationships, though. By way of example, such situations may potentially lead to compulsive behaviours and addiction to the Internet that, in fact, have nothing to do with socialising but rather separate an individual from real interaction. Becoming more and more engaged in what is going on in the world of social media may cause the community ties to loosen as a result of one's being stuck in front of the screen and his fear of missing out[13].

That is why one should endeavour to understand social media ads operation and some basic persuasive stratagems behind the words and images used therein in order not to fall into a trap of emotional substitution social networking sites threaten us with. In the lines to follow, the author shall therefore briefly address the questions concerning the visual, multimodal, and (artificially) emotionalised turn in communication patterns fostered by social networking sites.

Research Part – Analysing Ads on FACEBOOK

The paramount objective of the study was to inspect the language of social media ads and to inquire into the question of how the multimodal aesthetic and linguistic code of new media shape ads on FACEBOOK. To this end, circa 100 FACEBOOK multimodal ads were scrutinised by the author for language structures and idiosyncrasies, taking under consideration ad type and key structural features, as well as visual elements and specific language features employed that were present in the analysed sample. The results are presented in the table below and expressed as a percentage.

Table 1. The presence of ads' features in a selection of FACEBOOK ads.

ADS' FEATURES	PRESENCE IN THE SAMPLE ANALYSED
AD TYPE	–
B2C	87%
B2B	13%
STRUCTURAL FEATURES	–
strong visual appeal	77%
conciseness	70%
longer copy	30%
interactivity / hyperlinks / outbound links	100%
multimodal eclecticism	100%

[13] A. K. Przybylski et al., *Motivational, Emotional, and Behavioral Correlates of Fear of Missing Out*, „Computers in Human Behavior", 2013, No. 29, pp. 1841-1848.

VISUAL FEATURES INCLUDED	–
images	71%
videos	20%
emoticons / emoji	93%
GIF files / boomerang videos	9%
LANGUAGE FEATURES INCLUDED	–
familiarly of address	91%
simple language /spoken-like forms	54%
imperatives	40%
questions	39%
repetition	9%
hashtags	23%
accumulation of punctuation marks	32%
majuscules	44%

Source: Own research

The qualitative content analysis of social media advertising based on a collection of random FACEBOOK ads gathered between April and September 2017 has shown that visual appeal (77%), conciseness (70%), interactivity (100%), and multimodal eclecticism (100%) are most prevalent in the sampled social media ads. In general, business-to-consumer (B2C) ads were more widespread than their business-to-business (B2B) counterparts and, as confirmed by Swani et al.[14], neither category was reported to adopt „hard sell" strategies. As follows from the analysis, ads on FACEBOOK are often designed so as to address the user personally and establish a good rapport with him or her thanks to familiar expressions and spoken-like register that was found out to be present in 54% of the ads analysed. This would explain the application of imperatives and conversational style resembling an attempt at a *tête-à-tête* with the target audience; the imperative form can usually be found in the hyperlink buttons or outbound links to the product's website.

> „These are the seven button options to choose from: *Shop Now*, *Book Now*, *Learn More*, *Sign Up*, *Download*, *Watch More*, [and] *Contact Us*. The theory behind why this button works is that it helps focus your ad to an even greater degree (…). Adding a button enhances the call-to-action and primes a reader to take the action"[15].

[14] K. Swani, B. P. Brown, and G. R. Milne, *Should tweets differ for B2B and B2C? An analysis of Fortune 500 companies' Twitter communications,* „Industrial Marketing Management", 2014, No. 43 (5), pp. 873-881.
[15] K. Lee, *The 7 Hidden Factors of the Most Effective Social Media Ads*, „Buffer Blog" – Thoughts on Social Media & Online Marketing, 2015.

Nevertheless, the imperative form (40% presence) is not the only one used; social media ads often ask questions as well (39% presence) with the aim of provoking thought on the possible answer (usually, the brand, product or service advertised is implied to be the answer). The advertising copy tends to be concise and meaning-laden, as well as to contain characteristic power words and calls to action, often accompanied by time prompts like „buy now" or „limited time".[16] The message is further strengthened by means of appealing visuals in the form of a picture (71% presence), emoticon or emoji (93% presence) that supply the audience with sensual experience and with the emotional ingredient.

Various realisations of the emotional appeal were found to be present in the majority of advertising messages examined, ranging from emoticons and emoji or photos to emotive language expressed via the accumulation of punctuation marks (32% presence) and the use (or overuse) of majuscules[17] (44% presence) typical for internet registers. Moreover, inducing emotions such as liking is also achieved thanks to ads personalisation to make them match the member's account. Additionally, the emotional aspect can be introduced by the netters themselves since they are provided with an opportunity to interact with the advertiser in the comment section, i.e. to „talk" with the ad or with other users who buy, use or like the product or service on offer. To the author's mind, such an illusion of contact with the brand renders it more pleasant and approachable, which translates into enhanced brand liking.

The Internet, as a hybrid medium exploiting other media forms, from written text to motion picture, renders social media ads unique thanks to the exceptional combination of static and dynamic multimodal content in one advertising message. The visual turn in internet communication is also noticeable: the visual appeal is realised by means of emoticons and emoji, attractive images, hashtags, colours, and links. Websites in general constitute the most eclectic form of written language[18] owing to colour-coding and different fonts or font types available, whereas the use of colour in social media ads' hyperlinks not only catches the eye, but also invites the netter to click and explore the interactive advertising content by himself or herself.

As far as the language of social media ads is concerned, it is composed of both textual and visual codes so one can undoubtedly identify multimodality as its characteristic feature. The role of the word in the realm of the Internet is diminishing[19], however, owing to the fact that online communication through computer-mediated technologies necessitates the combination of different codes

[16] Ibidem.
[17] A. Panek, *Język w przestrzeni internetu*, „Przestrzeń społeczna – Social space", 2016, No. 1, pp. 5-7.
[18] D. Crystal, *Language and the Internet*..., op. cit., p. 205.
[19] A. Panek, *Język w przestrzeni internetu*..., op. cit., p. 1.

with a view to simplifying the message as much as possible[20]. Consequently, the textual layer is rather limited and reduced to keywords, short phrases, questions, exclamations or imperatives that involve speech stylisation to make the message resemble spoken register. The advertisers are hence inclined to use compact speech-like forms, as well as to decide on the use of schematic language patterns and suggestive imagery, realised by means of photos, videos, emoticons, and emoji, in order to present the audience with shortcuts to other, more complex meanings they can easily decipher on their own[21].

Communication strategies within the internet medium rely on both verbal and visual stimuli, the combination of which is realised in hyperlinks that adopt the written form but are frequently colour-coded in order to catch the eye of the netter. The ads' interactivity[22] is a key factor as well, for the use of hyperlinks contributes to a phenomenal multidimensionality of information transmission that makes it possible to guide the user from one website to another[23] in a non-linear manner. The Internet as such is characterised by non-linear viewing, that is, it does not assume any fixed reading sequence, which is why advertisers go to great lengths to create attractive messages that will guide the recipient's eye movement[24] and thus control his or her attention.

Concluding Remarks And Implications For Future Research

All in all, upon the inspection of the sample, one can definitely state that the analysis conducted confirms the adjustment of the structure and form of the selected FACEBOOK ads to the general internet register. Both the format and style in the sampled ads conform to the standardised rules of this particular social networking site. As far as the format is concerned, advertising messages on FACEBOOK assume the form of ordinary posts, which is why it becomes easy to work them into the content scrolled down the screen by the netter and, hence, make the marketing message part of the users' daily infotainment dosage. In parenthesis, let it be added that, when it comes to social media in general, the line between the content chosen by the netter and that imposed by the advertiser seems to blur, making the netter unconsciously ingest what he is presented with.

[20] Ibidem, p. 2.
[21] A. Stwora, *Moc rozdźwięku, antonimii i kontrastu, czyli różne oblicza odwrotności znaczeniowej w multimodalnych komunikatach reklamowych*, [in:] *Światło-cień. Językowy wymiar kontrastu*, M. Będkowska-Obłąkand A. Jackiewicz (eds.), Kraków 2017, p. 125.
[22] D. Crystal, *Language and the Internet*..., op. cit., p. 212.
[23] M. H. Jackson, *Assessing the structure of communication on the World Wide Web*, „Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication", 1997, No. 3 (1), p. 8.
[24] D. Crystal, *Language and the Internet*..., op. cit., p. 204.

Reverting to the structural and stylistic features of the ads analysed (see Table 1), one can see that the unique mixture of conciseness, multimodality, interactivity, and strong visual appeal is indeed indicative of the contemporary multimodal and visual turn in communication. The emphasis is placed on images, emoticons, and emoji that both accompany and enrich the textual layer, which, in turn, gravitates towards spoken-like register and familiarity of address that can possibly make the netter feel an emotional affinity with the brand. The textual in the ads is further characterised by the accumulation of punctuation marks and the use (or overuse) of majuscules typical of internet genres. As social networking sites are becoming „the primary arena for highly targeted marketing and advertising"[25], it seems necessary for advertising agencies to comply with the requirements of new media and, accordingly, to speak „the new language" as well. That is why the advertising content needs to be adjusted to this new norm of constructing and showing ads *per se*.

Contemporary social media ads exist in a proliferation of forms as they may use a real plethora of various stimuli. The idiosyncratic features of social media advertising present on facebook boil down to one aspect, namely to multimodality. It is the multimodal quality that allows for the coexistence, co-operation, and „co-meaningfulness" of different semiotic codes in one artefact, which is possible thanks to the online environment that is „immensely more varied in its communicative options through the availability of such dimensions as colour, movement, and animation"[26], and thus excels as a medium.

The peculiarity of the language of advertising on facebook outlined in this paper may, in fact, point out to potential revisions of popular communication patterns fostered by mass and social media. The multimodal and visual turn are in vogue, making people speak by means of GIF files, boomerang videos, emoticons, and emoji enabling to encode meanings in little yet perfectly comprehensible and universal images. Shortened textual forms and the accumulation of punctuation marks combined with the pictorial component, for instance, are only several examples to testify to the ongoing change in terms of language patterns on social networking sites.

This paper posits that the new „grammar" of social media communication may prove to have an impact on human communication patterns themselves, changing the way people communicate on a daily basis. Moreover, the sociolinguistic examination conducted allows for investigations into the social and cultural aspect of social media in general, as well as into the emotional nature of one's interaction with the stream of information. The notion of social media itself assumes the existence of a certain social context in which various online contents

[25] P. S. Jothi et al., *Analysis of social networking sites: A study on effective communication strategy in developing brand communication,* „Journal of Media and Communication Studies", 2011, No. 3 (7), p. 239.
[26] Ibidem, p. 204.

function, interacting with mass audiences and individual targets alike; therefore, it seems worthwhile to ponder over the emotional side of the advertising discourse in social media in the light of relationship and community crises in real life. The author of this paper speculates that social media posts, including ads, filled with spontaneous or spontaneous-like emotional appeal can potentially substitute for the emotional experience outside the internet domain. An implication of this line of reasoning is that an advertising message can become a friend, literally and metaphorically, if the netters feel an affinity with the brand thanks to the spoken-like, or even man-like, register, accompanied by attractive visual packaging, so to speak.

In order to reach more people effectively, brands in social media transform into user's accounts in order to remain on the same conversational plane with the prospects for them to feel equal – just like partners in a conversation. Owing to the fact that both the product and the netter are equal and maybe even similar facebook users that speak the same language, the brand's message becomes something natural and unintrusive, which induces liking. The most important thing, however, is to sensitise people, especially the young, to the operation of social media ads, to their playing with human emotions, as well as to the persuasive schemes devised by the advertisers. It is also vital to notice the magnificent complementarity of the elements belonging to the textual, visual, and sometimes even of the aural domain[27] of advertising in social media and to see that language and society are interrelated entities sharing communication patterns. It would therefore be advisable to monitor both internet registers and the genre of social media ads, for their multimodal and thus diversified format is indicative of the multimodal and visual turn in communication the society is experiencing in this day and age.

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Summary

In new media contexts, as „media markets became the main advertising and marketing environments"[28], the role of multimodal advertising communication is perhaps most evident, especially when it comes to social media. However, little do we realise how social media are changing the society, its language, and communication patterns; furthermore, little do we notice the idiosyncratic features of social media advertising as well, taking them for granted. It would, therefore, be germane to inspect the way in which social media ads are woven into the tissue of contemporary society, as well as the way in which they influence modern communication patterns. The aim of this paper is to discuss these issues related to social media ads from the sociolinguistic and sociocultural standpoint, with considerable emphasis placed on FACEBOOK ads, as well as to present the format they employ as indicative of the contemporary multimodal and visual turn in communication.

Keywords: advertising, social media, sociolinguistics, sociology, communication patterns.

[28] S. Brierley, *The Advertising Handbook...,* op. cit., p. 18.