

The Use of Nostalgia in Advertising: Semiotic Analysis of a Television Commercial

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the connection between emotions and communication through a semiotic analysis of the passion of nostalgia in commercial advertising. Specifically, on the one hand, this work recalls some of the definitions and descriptive categories of nostalgia (classical nostalgia/postmodern nostalgia, historical nostalgia/personal nostalgia). On the other hand, it analyzes from a semiotic point of view a case of nostalgic advertising in the field of technology, an audiovisual commercial by Telecom Italia that appeals to consumers' emotions to stimulate an intense nostalgia feeling for the past.

Keywords: Semiotics, Advertising, Emotions, Nostalgia, Text Analysis.

0. Introduction

In the last decade there has been a significant rise in the number and variety of advertising texts centered on the theme of nostalgia, the purpose of which is to attract consumers into the vast structure of memory, appealing to their sense of nostalgia to develop emotional responses to products. Nostalgia can be defined as an affection for objects and activities from an earlier period in one's life. It has been conceptualized as the cognitive and emotional process when one is reminiscing about the past (CARMAN et al., 2005). Cognitions of the past involve thinking, recalling, imagining, and reminiscing. Moreover, nostalgia it is an effect of sense that mass media and brand companies use to increase emotional engagement with products. Anything from a familiar song to a recognizable fashion or hairstyle can increase brand perception and retention.

Media and marketing cooperate to stimulate new or old feelings of nostalgia, selecting from the past what is worth recovering (FABRIS 2003, pp. 276-277). Memories in our past are triggered by nostalgic ads, enveloping everyday life and continually interacting with the practices and choices concerning consumers' lives. For this reason, advertising represents an interesting area for analyzing the phenomenon of nostalgia. Moving from these premises, this paper aims at deepening the connection between semiotics, emotions and communication (through the form of advertising), (i) recalling some of the definitions and descriptive categories of nostalgia (classical nostalgia/postmodern nostalgia, historical nostalgia/personal nostalgia) and (ii) then analyzing from a semiotic point of view a case of nostalgic advertising in the field of technology (an audiovisual commercial by Telecom Italia).

1. Nostalgia, consumption and consumer behavior

In the current context of consumption there is an increasing use of nostalgia marketing techniques, which allow many companies to sell their product or brand to a certain target, by catching people's attention and stimulating the rise of a nostalgic feeling (STERN 1992, p. 22). Nostalgia is the desire of a thing that it is part of the past and gone times. Originally, as this term entered the various European languages, it meant a serious psychological disease. With the passing of the time, it slowly became considered as a sentiment, something that inspired philosophers, literate men, and writers. Today nostalgia is part of our reality, it is something that is strongly connected with our cultural and social habits; nostalgia is like a power which, by recalling back pieces of information from our

memory (personal and collective), gives us the possibility to build the future in the present time, by giving to it a sense and a value that have their roots in the past (MEO 2010, p.13).

In the academic field, nostalgia has been widely studied and referred to as “an individual’s longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday, or a fondness for possessions and activities associated with days of yore”; a positive disposition towards places or things that we used to have times before (HOLBROOK 1993, p.245). Nostalgia is defined as one of the real main passions, as described by GREIMAS in his analysis in 1986. It is a huge feeling of pain for the loss of something, in this specific case for the loss of the times gone, that cannot be back anymore and cannot be relived (BROWN et al., 2003). Semantically speaking, nostalgia is pathemic: this means that is a fully developed passion, that has reached the peak of intensity. It is well defined and, for this reason, also easily identifiable. It is qualitatively strong, but quantitatively small, because very few subject are affected by this passion. In other words, the most a passion is strong and well defined, the least the number of people who can experience it (PANOSSETTI 2013).

Nostalgia appears to be becoming an increasingly significant and debated emotion in late-modern culture (JACOBSEN 2020). It is a feeling capable to generate strong and intense sense of remembrance of something that was good and does not exist anymore. In this present time of uncertainty and constant feeling of not having or, still worse, losing control on things and situation that we live because of the high speed of our modern and high-tech life, the past become a safe place, ideal and happy. A past where life was easier and that, perception that makes consumers feel comfortable to return in. To think about things of the past creates a feel of comfort and safeness, if compared with the uncertainty that characterizes the present and the future, in these times of great instability because of issues concerning international security and economic crises.

From the word “nostalgia” originates the concept of nostalgia marketing, a marketing technique more and more used in the last years (BOERO 2019). The nostalgia marketing is a strategic tool used by companies when both launching a new product or a promotional campaign, which stimulates the memory of people and try to newly generate a tight emotional bond with the past. This is usually done with a variety of means as types of music, words and pictures that can recall back in memory the times already gone. It is clearly visible in fact, by doing a cultural analysis, that in the post-industrial and globalized society of nowadays there is an increasing growth of things that remember somehow the past. This phenomenon is visible in a variety of sectors, things, and practices. The past times can be compared to an intangible place where people can find memories and symbols that marketers can use as a tool in the present time. This process usually works through images: they are all put into a frame, that does not contain facts and things really happened and that were effectively part of the past, but that contains instead a nostalgic interpretation of those. It could be, in fact, that we did not ever buy, or wear, or eat in that very way, but the important thing is that we have memories of it and that it makes us feel something strong. Many studies have been carried out on nostalgia and the processes it generates on people mind, which is called “retrospective optimism”: it means that people tend to remember the past in a better way as it really was and for this reason, the remembrance of the past generates automatically a sense of “it was a better time and I miss it”, so a positive connection with the past. It was all about the positive disposition described by HOLBROOK and SCHINDLER (2003): it is because of it that there can be a connection between marketing and nostalgia. As direct consequence of it, the use of nostalgia as a marketing tool can be very persuasive and effective.

On the base of many studies (STERN 1992, BROWN 2001, MEO 2010) we can distinguish four types of nostalgia. The first is personal (or classical) nostalgia, a kind of feeling generated from a personally remembered past, real experiences that a person has lived or things that he/she really had during childhood or as teenager; it is strongly connected with personal memories. It is when a product is launched again on the market some years after it disappeared so that the consumers have already had a previous knowledge of a product. This type of nostalgia is very strong and is massively used to stimulate consumers on the base of what they experienced, even if a product does not combine perfectly with how it was in the past (changed shape, colors, taste, packaging, etc.). It can stimulate

memories in any case and to create a strong connection between a certain product/brand and people who remember of it.

The second is the historical, interpersonal nostalgia (also post-modern nostalgia): this kind of feeling is generated from things and situations that existed in a certain time in history in which the person involved was not born yet. For this reason, it is generated through the tales and experiences of other people, like parents and relatives, which by transferring to us their memories give us a source for nostalgic feelings. Another way of creating memories of something that existed in a period of time in which the consumer was not born yet is through the “media storage”, because thanks to the media (in particular the television) we can create a collective and permanent memory, in which are contained facts, things and trends of times very distant in the past (POLIDORO 2019). This kind of nostalgia is strong too and used to stimulate customers activities. Cultural nostalgia involves shared memories, that, for this very reason, get very pleasant, as they can be enjoyed with other people. This generates an intense emotional commitment, because facts are not only remembered as they have been experienced by the subjects, but they are also evoked in a participative and collective environment, and they are projected into the present/future time. Examples can be family or school trips. Virtual nostalgia relates to the fantastic /factionary world. We live a feeling of nostalgia through the remembrance or the finding of an old a book, a videogame, or a film that we had saw as we were children. They have already a connection with the past, so that can easily generate a nostalgic emotion on subjects.

Marketing strategies that are used to stimulate all the types of nostalgia feeling are several, but the common starting point of all these those is that marketers who want to use nostalgia have to “sell a tale” (BOERO 2017, p. 46) because today it is the only way to appeal the modern consumer, who is constantly searching for emotions more than utility functions. Advertising is one of the main tools used by marketing to convey the nostalgia feeling. In the next paragraph we will focus on an audiovisual in which nostalgia is inserted as the main pathemic configuration of the text. The analysis follows the structuralist and generative approach of Greimasian semiotics, highlighting the main aspects that contribute to the effectiveness of the text (TRAINI 2008), in relation to the brand discourse (MARRONE 2007).

2. Content Analysis of the Telecom institutional Commercial

Among the many TV advertisements containing nostalgia marketing strategies, this work focuses on the advertisement “Le emozioni non cambiano” by Telecom Italia¹, exploring how nostalgia can be infused and represented in the field of technology. This commercial is significant in terms of brand storytelling, because it expresses the history of the brand – the whole history of SIP and, later, Telecom Italia – through many vintage elements. Everything is coherently mixed, to stimulate an intense nostalgia feeling for the past: technology, fashion, design, and music, with a famous song of the Beatles, icons of the Sixties and of the vintage trend. Target of this campaign are Italian people over 40, which lived almost totally the scenes that are evoked in the advertisement in person, and that have got an income that allow them to buy the services. Younger consumers, as the millennials, are only partially struck by those marketing techniques, because they feel nostalgia indirectly, as consequence of their parents and grandparents’ tales.

In the commercial we can see the life and adventures of a young woman, Francesca, whom life has been traced back to the moment of her birth, to arrive to the moment in which she becomes grandmother of a girl whose name is Francesca. All the sequences entail family themes. From the family scenes we can understand the atmosphere of the ad, that is focused on Francesca’s life and its evolution, which is strictly connected to the wanting or need to communicate with some members of her family. The image which the viewer receives is that of a beautiful and maybe a little stereotyped

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_E9WT6n8y2A

Italian family, that is analyzed from different perspectives and in many historical and personal moments of the time.

The many house environments that have been set up let us perceive the warmth of the environment and protection, the willing to share experiences and happenings, so in general the ad symbolizes the love of the family and cohesion among the members. Atmospheres that have been evoked are many and all different. It is possible, however, to find the most important ones, which can be found in each sequence of this ad: the willing to share experiences, with members of the family who are distant in space, and the fact of managing to do it thanks to Telecom Italia products.

The telephone – in all its forms and technological evolutions – is a key object in the overall narration. It conveys the entire meaning of the ad, that is to communicate with people which are not there. As well as the telephone, also all the other Telecom Italia apparels that can be seen conveys the same meaning. The dresses and the font used helps to display a certain historical period. So, for example, the occupied school on the third scene represents the great period of changing in Europe, in 1968. This recalls the idea of revolution on a double sense: revolution in society, and for this reason the company Telecom Italia, which was already there, and despite all the changing, was still there after that period, but also the revolution of the world in general, which always moves.

The verbal register in this ad is represented by the years, that are explicitly written down. They do not only help the viewer to follow the plot and the history of Francesca, but also help to create an effect of nostalgia, because the viewer, by watching the written numbers, in a certain font (carefully selected for each year and very typical of the communication style of those years), automatically feels that the story is more real, and can attach to the written years episodes that have happened in his/her real life.

Also the closing slogan “Le emozioni non cambiano. Il modo di comunicarle, sì” is full of meaning. It testified all the happenings that have been important both for the Italian country and people and expresses the brand mission: the willing to be there when things will change again, as in the past fifty years. The chosen colors, white and red, recall the colors of the historical logo. The rhythm of the Ad is very fast, so it would sometimes be difficult to follow the narrative line. The aid is given by the written years, because for each year – with an exception – there is a scene, so a sequence. Two are the scenes that are not signaled by the year; one is right in the middle of the continuum, so it is difficult to recognize it if the viewer does not pay attention, because it is the second part of the previous one; the other scene is at the very end of the spot, but it results totally out of the continuum. It is more a closing scene, which helps to contextualize the advertisement with present reality.

On this basis, we can divide the Telecom audiovisual in 9 different scenes, highlighting for each one the elements that characterize the discursive and narrative structure. The narrative scheme of an advertising text is analyzed through the actantial model by Greimas (1983), which can be used to analyze any action, and those displayed in images or literary texts. Many of the scenes have got the same actantial structure; however, some are quite different. The discursive configuration changes, revealing the changing in society when considering the scenes from 1 to 7. The scene 8 and 9 changes a little bit; at the very end, after a written slogan and after the animated logo of the company, there is the last scene.

In the first scene (1953) we see Francesca’s father in a small shop. He is calling his mother through a flat line in a shop, in order to tell her that Francesca was born. Many figures of the world (an old telephone, an old car and a calendar) convey the themes of the birth of Francesca. Concerning the narrative aspects, the subject is Francesca’s father, and the object is the aim to communicate Francesca’s birth. The distance can be seen as an opponent, the one which provokes the need to communicate and use the helper; the helper is the telephone, because thanks to it that the communication can happen.

In the second scene (1957) we see a funny family scene, with a little Francesca and her parents at home, in which she is holding the telephone receiver. The actors are Francesca’s father and mother and the little Francesca. The space is their home; figures of the world such as an old telephone hung

on the wall convey the themes of family time and everyday routine. In this scene there is a collective subject (the family), and the object is the desire to communicate with someone who is not there. The opponent is the distance while the helper is the telephone because it is thanks to it that the communication can happen.

In the third scene (1972) we see Francesca in front of an occupied school inside a telephone booth, she is talking with someone while a friend is waiting for her. A young Francesca and her friend are the actors of this scene; the space is the area in front of an occupied school, a telephone booth. The telephone booth, many students and the school express the themes of friendship and activism. The subject is Francesca, and the object is the desire to communicate with someone who is not there. The opponent is the distance between Francesca and the person she is talking to and, as in the previous scenes, the helper is the telephone, because it is thanks to it that the communication can happen.

In the fourth scene (1981) we see a pregnant Francesca, while she is at her new place together with her boyfriend (or husband) and her father. The boy is straightening up some books, that he has already thrown out of some boxes on the floor, while Francesca's father is holding a receiver. The actors are a pregnant Francesca, her boyfriend/husband and her father. The space is a new home. Figures of the world such as the telephone, many boxes, many books indicate the themes of the changing and family. The subject is Francesca, who has the desire to have a communication apparel at home (object). The opponent is the situation of Francesca, who is pregnant and cannot move freely, while the helper is Francesca's father, who helps her to install the telephone in the new home.

In the fifth scene (1995) we see at first Francesca at her workplace while she is talking at the mobile telephone. We understand she is working because she is wearing the classical clothes of a doctor, with a blue uniform and a white hospital gown. Francesca plays the thematic role of the doctor; and the space in which the scene happens is hospital hall. In this case, the mobile telephone allows the ad to express the themes of life at work and engagement. In the scene after, the sixth (1995), we see a school director talking at the telephone in his office and a child, alone and outside the door, who seems not to feel very well, because he is holding a tissue on his nose, and he has got a black eye. The actors are the school director and the son of Francesca, and the space is the director's office. The main figures are the telephone and the paper tissue hold by the child, that convey the themes of the mischievous trick of the child and the seriousness of the director. The subject is the school director, who has the necessity to communicate to Francesca that something happened at school to her son. The opponent is the distance, which this time has been represented by the change of setting. The helper are the two telephones; the one in the director's office, which allows him to call Francesca, and the second one, that is the mobile phone that allows Francesca to be reached at work. The two apparels make the communication happens.

It is interesting to notice that the scenes of the year 1995 are two and, apparently, they are not connected, if the viewer does not pay attention. The settings are different. Francesca uses a mobile phone while standing and moving, while the school director is sitting on his room, talking through a landline. The element that makes the connection explicit is Francesca's son. Only by understanding that something happened to him at school, we understand that the director had the necessity to call Francesca and inform her about the situation of her son, so that once again the theme of the family is back.

In the seventh scene (2000) we can see the main character, Francesca, that brings a cup of something to her son, who is studying in his bedroom next to a big old home computer. The actors are a mature Francesca and her young son. The space is the son's bedroom/studio. Computer, books and exercise books, a cup of something are the figures used to convey the themes of life of a student and engagement. The subject is Francesca's son who aims at learning and doing research by using the computer. The opponent is the distance between the guy and the information he needs, while the helper is primarily the computer and the Internet connection; then, also Francesca can be considered a minor helper, because she is actually who decided to get the computer and Internet connection at home.

In the eighth scene (2011) we see Francesca's son at the hospital, with his girlfriend (or wife) and his newborn, the little Francesca. He makes a video call to his mother, and a new scene opens into the display of the smartphone, because there are Francesca and her husband at home who say hello to the newborn granddaughter. The actors are the son of Francesca with his partner and her newborn daughter Francesca, a senior Francesca and her husband. The space of narration is the bed in the hospital room and the living room of Francesca's place. Figures such as the smartphone and the laptop convey the themes of the joy for the birth, the love of the family, the fact to communicate the new. The subject is Francesca's son and the object is the desire to communicate the beautiful news and let Francesca and her husband see the newborn, as well as to tell them that the newborn's name will be the same as his mother. As in the previous scenes, the opponent is the distance between the guy and his family, while the helpers are the smartphone, with the Internet connection, and Francesca's laptop, which together allow the characters to communicate and to see each other.

After all these scenes we can read the motto of the ad and then the logo of Telecom Italia. The viewer can think that the ad has ended up, but a new scene appears to close it, that is the two Francesca together, on the little Francesca's bed, looking at something that makes them smile on a tablet. This scene is the most complexed, because it seems to be divided into two different scenes and happens in two different settings, but at the end we understand that they are unified by the computer, on which the first part of the scene is seen; so it is like a sequence into the sequence. The ninth refers to the future. The actors are Francesca and her granddaughter Francesca. The time is not well defined, but they are talking about the future and the granddaughter is some years older (about 5 years old). The space is the bed in the young Francesca's room. The tablet and the bed convey the themes of the joy of staying together, the love of the family, the fact to enjoy a new entertainment system together. The subjects are the senior Francesca and the young Francesca. Their object of value is the desire to enjoy the time together. There are apparently no opponents, and the helper is the tablet.

All the sequences recall moments of a daily routine from 1953 to arrive to the future, while the last scene (the only one which does not entail indications about the year) should refer to a future year (as the small Francesca has already grown up, so a future of 4-5 years). From a narrative point of view, we can notice how the sender remains always the same and it coincides with the receiver and with the subject; also, the object, which in this spot is not an item but a goal, is always the willing to communicate something and doing it using Telecom Italia products or services, which in turn are always the helper. We can notice that the object is the willing to communicate something to somebody which is not there, so the object (the person who causes the communication) and the subject are distant. Each scene entails the telephone or a service/product of Telecom Italia, but in the video, it has been never talked directly about them, nor referred to them.

There are some other elements that are strictly related to the past and which concur to stimulate the vintage mood. One is the font used to write the number of the years: for each different year it has been used a different font, typical of the advertising style of those decades; settings are well studied in order to recall some situations and spaces that are part also of the collective memory and history. For example, 1972 was a period of great changing in Italy, so that a school occupation has been chosen to represent that situation. Moreover, the clothes used have been carefully chosen to be highly representative of each year. Finally, the last element that is highly connected with the past is the song that has been chosen: the song Hello, Goodbye of Beatles, released in 1967. Beatles have been a very appreciated and one of the most famous British rock groups which created many soundtracks for the lives of old generations, also in Italy. "Hello", "Goodbye" are also typical terms used in English during a phone call, hello when answering and goodbye to take one's leave.

3. Conclusion

The Telecom commercial offers an interesting overview on Italian history of telecommunication, from the moment it was not so easily accessible, because only some shops had a landline, which

served an entire neighborhood, to the moment (the present time) when it has become integrant part of our daily routine through many apparels. The possibility to communicate also by distance is the train of thoughts which connects each sequence of the Ad. The element that conveys this is the presence of a Telecom Italia apparel in each scene: telephones (of any sort, from the vintage one to the present smartphones), a computer, a laptop, a smartphone and, at the end, a tablet.

Another element, which conveys the fact that telecommunication entered every aspect of the daily life, is that the setting of each sequence displays a classical scene of the life of everyone, home, shop, school, workplace. Family and union with members of it is also a very important element, which conveys a positive feeling to the viewer, and which also expresses the main target of the advertisement: families, in fact, are those who choose to install a Telecom Italia service to their houses.

Workplaces (which are also very often represented in the spot), address instead the viewer which own a company as well as to self-employed ones, people who find Telecom Italia services and product very useful, if not essential for their business activity. The happy family can be represented as a myth, a stereotypic representation of Italian families, also because we know that today the society is changing and that this situation does not represent the whole reality anymore (single parents, for example, are increasingly entering the society pattern).

The final written part “*Le emozioni non cambiano. Il modo di comunicarle, sì*” entails the whole meaning of the advertisement and expresses it in words in case the message was not clear yet to the viewer. It communicates the fact that the world has changed and keeps changing and moving toward a more and more technological future, as well the society, which has transformed with the passing of time and with changing technology, but some things as family, happiness for an important event or warring, and the need to share it with important people, are those “emotions” which will always remain the same. In other words, the brand constructs itself its role of omniscient being, something which testified the past, important happenings, with both a personal and an historical-social function, and that commits itself to improve people’s lives.

The text is coherent in all the sequences because the basic theme, the communication, remains in every sequence of the text. The plot that expresses the enunciation of the text is well developed and follows not only a temporary order, which is also easy to be understood thanks to the written years, but also a very well-defined path. The element that creates connection and linearity is the music, because despite the scenes change rapidly, as well as settings, actors, colors, because they cover a range of 50 years, the music is the only element that always remains the same and which create continuity. The ad is conceived in order to stimulate the purchase of products and services through the use of nostalgia marketing strategies because the references to the vintage are many. The textual part at the end well resumes the message.

The video perfectly makes use of the past to talk about future and what will happen, and this is a very known nostalgia marketing technique. From a semiotic point of view, it can be affirmed that, in the advertisement, there is euphoric involvement towards the communication that can happen, despite the distance; while there is dysphoria towards the communication that could not happen. Those feelings are made stronger by the fact that today for people it is unimaginable a life without communication because this process is at the base of our lives; the enthusiasm about the ad is posed on the fact that it retraces the path that has brought some apparels like telephone an Internet to be part of our lives. This stimulates not only the vintage mood towards old apparels that are part of the collective memory (because everyone had an old telephone at home) but also enthusiasm toward the new and technological apparels which today connect us more and more.

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