

The Narrating Instances in Advertising Stories

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Abstract: *Most of the commercials we watch on a daily basis are created by developing specific narrative strategies, and inside them we can easily identify the stable structure of advertising communication. This is why, in this case, narrative instances describe the relationship between the storyteller, customer and the main character. When we analyze the literary texts, these coordinates offer a classic connection including other instances such as: author, narrator, character and reader. The difference consists in adapting the literary instances to the main goal of the ad, whose main outcome should be to persuade the customers and sell them products. Therefore, the customer becomes the reader, i.e. the message receiver, fact that assumes his integration into the story, as a possible buyer. The purpose of this article is to prove that advertising stories follow a similar construction to those of the fictional texts, even if the main feature of this area is concision. Moreover, the narration develops in commercials creations on two levels: on the one hand, on the verbal level, and, on the other hand, the visual level. For this reason, the story is told with the help of a complementary character making the link between image and word. In most of the cases the roles (play parts) are split equally between both levels and the story is built through a double story-telling. In each case, the way of telling the story could*

be approached differently according to various television formats such as: testimonial, demonstration, slice of life, animation. Regarding the narrator, the commercials formats imply a specific pattern depending on the story and the characters' involvement. The narration has a single purpose: to sell the product getting over its features repeatedly, but coming closer to the customer who enjoys to listen to stories and identifying with its heroes. Even if a commercial shows only for a couple of seconds, the story is focused on the narrative instances and runs everything more dynamically and by using interesting narrative strategies such as: retrospection, introspection, plot fragmentation, embedding techniques or parallel plans of the narration. Who tells the story and to whom it is told are the coordinates of every ad which relies on the product genesis and use, whose images are supposed to be credible.

Keywords: *narrator, storyteller, image, consumer*

1. The Narrativity Concept

The ability of writing or telling a story was deeply examined and debated over time and the reviewers assume many perspectives upon the narrativity research. Abbot Porter pointed out an authentic list of the most well known terms related with this field, such as: “narrativeness”, “narrative-hood”, “narratibility”, “tellability”, “emplotment”, (Paul Ricoeur), “eventfulness”. (Abbott, 2009: 309). The development of storytelling made its meaning richer along the time in many other fields besides the literary one, and we can mention media, daily conversation, didactic situations. The only explanation for this expansion of what initially belonged to the fictional writing field is the awareness of the presence of narration in every single human activity and the universal ability for telling a story. (The expansion of what initially belonged to the fictional writing field can be explained in this way: people became much more aware about the fact that narration is present in every single human activity. Also, telling a story is a universal ability). We choose to discuss Ryan’s point of view, because of his narrativity classification, which opens the door to different kinds of genres and types of narration, without going back deeply in the historical theories (Ryan, 1992: 368-387). Even if stories on many pages were considered the ideal example for the narrative level, everything relies on the complexity of the conflict

According to Ryan, we can speak about “simple narrativity”, “complex narrativity”, “figura narrativity”, “instrumental narrativity” and “proliferating narrativity”. At first sight, these names could be explained relying on many criteria such as: action purpose, events, characters, expansion of the action. The first type deals with a simple conflict or unpleasant situation as those we meet in jokes or short fairy tales, while the second one provides more than one narrative thread, making the connection between events. The next type involved universal philosophical concepts, which convey the meaning

in a very abstract way. “Instrumental narrativity” defines itself through the context where it is used, such as: discourses, sermons, ceremonies, medical prescriptions etc. The last one registered on the previous list distinguishes itself by sequential and different stories, which are written using the embedding technique as *Scheherazade* was conceived. We are interested in the first one, because the most common situations are short stories, but, in this case they express a special narrativity. Moreover, this perspective suggested that a story could be told in a couple of seconds in a different way of saying the event beyond the use of words, just like in the case of visual and musical communication or kinetics and proxemics. Obviously, this expansion of the classic concept can be described as a kind of syncretism and complementarity between the verbal and non-verbal levels. Thinking about different types of short communication, all the roads lead to the mass media, which extended the power of narrativity getting over the miracle of the words. This perspective explained that re-tuning story telling is adapting it to the contemporary society where the visual holds control upon the human-attention. Language – as Ryan suggested – became only an instrument, completely sustained or substituted by the non-verbal media: “It is only by reorganizing other types of narrativity in potential non-verbal media [...] – modes such as illustrating, re-telling, evoking and interpreting – that we can acknowledge the narrative power of media without a language track.” (Ryan, 2005: 292). All the visual arts (painting, film, theatre, design) developed internal clues of sharing an event using colour, moving and sounds language.

At this point of the discussion, we discover a possible definition of the narrativity concept as an ability of telling a story in an alternative way by using verbal or non-verbal tools organized on different levels of fictional or non-fictional interpretation. Since 2000, the reviewers within the Hamburg Narratology Research Group focused on understanding a narration as an eventfulness situation en-framed in a cultural and historical background which “afforded the recognition of different semantic socio-cultural fields”. (Hühn, apud Hühn et. al, 2008: 317). This way of re-considering the narration has already crossed the borders of fiction, that allows us to take into discussion the production of a commercial, by understanding the hybridization of its genre and the temptation to permanently find new means of selling the product to the consumer through a very ingenious way of telling its story.

2. The narrative signature in every story

This overcome of the classic borders refers to apply the narration rules and features to new text formats. (Overcoming classical borders are made possible when applying narration rules and features to new text formats). Despite the complexity or simplicity of the plots and the number of their pages, the message decoding is always relying on the next elements: the storyteller, the action, the heroes/characters, time and space perspective, dynamism and sequentiality. What a story is seems not to be very difficult to explain, but, exactly for these reason, the reviewers approached the concept

following the previous element we just noticed. From our point of view, Genette's view covered most of the aspects we analyzed: "If we accept, by convention, to relate to the field of literary expression, we can more easily define narration as a representation of an event or of a series of events, either real or fictional, through language or more specifically by writing language." (Genette, 1969: 49)¹

In the following lines, our aim is to explain the most important features we can identify a story as it is. The first one is the **storyteller/narrator** who tells the fact from the narrative discourse plan or from the narrated plan. He is responsible for the subject and the action line, he is the objective or a subjective voice, that links the character and the reader.

The **character's** role is equally important both in literature and in any media narration, because of the communication developed, just like Fotis Jannidis explained: "Viewing characters as entities of a story-world does not imply that they are self-contained. On the contrary, the story-world is constructed during the process of narrative communication, and characters thus form a part of the signifying structures which motivate and determine the narrative communication." (Jannidis, 2009: 15) From the advertising point of view, the character is acting in order to persuade the narrator, the watcher, and to determine him to buy the product. There are a couple of factors that may influence the customers' behaviour as a result of paying attention to a commercial, such as: his/her credibility, the communication with the target and the character's compatibility with the context and product features. For the last factor, the best example we may find is to advertise a new and modern car by using old and retired people, who are not the main target, at least in terms of income, instead of finding young and ambitious characters. The contrary situation would be possible if a production house used young people as actors (of course, in accordance with the script and storyboard) for a pension insurance commercial, who are not yet thinking about their old age.

The Hamburg Narratology Research Group has focused for many years on what narrative **events** mean, and how they are translated in terms of sequencing according to the order, time and space. What Barthes called *histoire* and *discourse*, became later an equivalent for *story* and *discourse*, from Chatman's point of view. *Story* or *fabula* refers to the chronological order of the events, based on the characters' action and on the causality of their facts. As for Bremond, the sequences are a sign of narrativity and much important than other story indices: "Each story consists in a discourse that integrated a series of events of human interest in the same stock unit. Where the sequences are not present, there is no story". (Bremond, 1966: 62)

1 "Si l'on accepte, par convention, de s'en tenir au domaine de l'expression littéraire, on définira sans difficulté le récit comme la représentation d'un événement ou d'une suite d'événements, réels ou fictifs, par le moyen du langage, et plus particulièrement du langage écrit." (Genette, 1969: 49)

The idea of keeping an **order** in the narrated acts implies taking into consideration the time and space line as well. There is a relevant distinction between the order of narration and the order of happened events, from the historic perspective. Analepse and prolepse are temporal means that help the reader to follow the plot by jumping in the past or, eventually, in the future, thanks to the narrative techniques and strategies. **Time and space** serve, on one hand, to describe the action projected in a specific background and, on the other hand, to point out the transition between the main sequences. Both of them are linking with the event order, because every change of the initial temporal and spatial coordinate entails a narrative transformation, especially when the reader follows the story of a character.

To briefly sum up the broader sense of this generic type of story, it is obvious that these elements are the same no matter what the type of narration is, but the representation of these features changes according to the media support. For this reason, advertising production (the TV commercials) draws attention by using special means for suggesting the events order, time, space and the action itself. The commercials are shot just like any movie, under these circumstances: the story takes a few seconds, it is short, clear and, moreover, credible. The advertising story we will display in the next lines was created for *Schwab Investor* and it is a spot whose narrative structure consists of two levels organized according to different criteria: the first is the temporal one and the second one is the narrated plane. We try to explain the spot, using a storyboard structure, without any technical details:

Visual story-60 seconds	Verbal story
<p>First frame: The child comes into mother's room, before she goes to sleep. The characters: mother and child</p>	<p>Little girl (LG): <i>Can you tell me a bedtime story?</i> Mom (M): <i>All right!</i></p>
<p>Second frame: transition between the real plane and the fictional one. Time: the future, where it will happen. The characters are: the young lady (who was the child in the first frame) and the prince. Mom becomes the storyteller and stay in the real plane, where the little girl is also present, dreaming about his future.</p>	<p>M: <i>Someday, when you grow up into a beautiful young lady, your knight will come, on a great white stallion. And he'll sweep you off of your feet,</i> LG: <i>Wow!...</i> M: <i>And he will take you to a beautiful castle</i> LG: <i>Really?</i> M: <i>He will marry you and give you everything your heart desires, for ever and ever.</i></p>
<p>Third frame – the story ends suddenly, everything comes back to the real plane. Mom rips the spell and destroys the dream</p>	<p><i>Of course, if it doesn't work out, you will need to understand the difference between a P ratio and a dividend yield, and a growth evaluation strategy.</i> <i>When we created a smarter type of investment firm, we created a smarter kind of investor.</i> <i>With online tools like a new Stock Explorer, which can teach you investment strategy, to help you build your own castle.</i> <i>To get your free sample of Stock Explorer, visit Schwab.com and click on...</i></p>

According to Bremond, the story has a t_1 time that is the present time and of the real life, t_2 -time of the story tale, t_3 -the present time where the story could be only a dream. The order of events uses prolepsis as a narrative strategy that allows jumping in the future and dreaming about a possible reality. The alternation of the narrative lines becomes possible, by using the „embedding technique”, as Tzvetan Todorov noticed, (Todorov, 1981: 52-53), which consists in framing a story in another narrative plan, in this case the story tale projected in the future is included in the present plan. Moreover, the order of events relies on the time alternation, taking into account that the little girl reacts enthusiastically during the story, interrupting it through an exclamation like: “Really?”

3. The narrative levels in a story

Reading or listening to an event is supposed to have a very interesting double meaning, on one hand, in what it tells us, and , on the other hand, how it is told. This affirmation claims to come up with a short presentation upon the main narrative indices, which are: the plot, the narrator, the character and the reader or receiver’s story.

Our discussion looks for making a connection between the narrative levels as Didier and Pier underline: “Narrative levels (also referred to as diegetic levels) is an analytic notion whose purpose is to describe the relations among the plurality of narrating instances within a narration, and more specifically the vertical relations between narrating instances.” (Peter Hühn, et. all, 2009: 295). According to their perspective, there are two types of possible relationships within a narrative text, regardless how it was created or its specificity: the horizontal relationship and the vertical one. The first dimension refers to the relations established between the characters or narrators acting on the same diegetic level. The vertical connection brings to light the relationships between the narrative instances situated on different levels and acting according with it. The last situation helps to describe how the character interacts with the narrator, or, in a broader sense, the way they communicate.

Instead of drawing a separate definition for each narrative instance, we consider that focusing on those relationships is more useful for identifying the features of narrative instances in every text, including the advertising stories, where the main goal is not the aesthetic one, but the functional and the commercial one.

3.1. The relationship established between the story-teller (narrator) and the story itself (narration)

The story-teller got the place of telling the story from his point of view and can be more or less involved inside the narrated plan. Following Genette, the narrator status could be classified according to his presence or absence from the narrative world. He could be heterodiegetic meaning that he sees everything from outside, being not

involved in the plot, homodiegetic, meaning that he is in the narrative world, and autodiegetic, which overlaps him one of the characters. Therefore, we are speaking about three narrative levels which change the narrator's role.

Summing up, the narrating situation varies depending on the narrator positions, which are: the intradiegetic or diegetic (when the storyteller belongs to the primary and unique narrated plan), the extradiegetic one (telling the story in this way implies an external position to any diegesis) and the metadiegetic (it refers to the narrative embedded within the intradiegetic level). Coming to the ads field, we will notice that we could meet examples from each type, but the difference consists in making them credible for the customer. For example, if one of the characters, which is actually an actor, tells a story about his life, the viewer will trust his confession more than an external one. On the other hand, sometimes the objective voice reminds customer the authority of a rational purchase, and in this case we speak about an extradiegetic level.

If we apply this concept to the advertising area and we go back to the *Schwab Investor* commercial we have just discussed in the previous lines, the narrator in there is undoubtedly the mother, who is telling the bed-time story to her daughter. At the beginning, for a few seconds, the mom speaks from an intradiegetic positions, because everything is happening in the present and real plane, where both characters are living. Then she becomes an extradiegetic narrator, because she does not get involved into the fairy tale, whose main character is her own daughter. From another point of view, we might admit that the storyteller belongs to a metadiegetic level too. At the end of the story, the narrator breaks the magic wave, and has already done the transition to the daily routine, which is situated in a different plan with close concern to the customer.

3.2. The relationship between the characters and the narrator

This aspect can be described as an articulation of the text from two main sides of each story: who is speaking? and who is watching? These questions bring into discussion some other distinctions: who knows the fact? and who says the fact? and who did the facts? Bal was one of the reviewers preoccupied by focalization, after Genette's found the first dichotomy we have just discussed.

He was concerned with the focal point and the subject under focus. Bal's description of this narrative hypostasis is very simple, because it pointed out the importance of the character: "The subject of focalization, the focalizer, is the point from which the elements are viewed. That point can lie within a character (i.e. an element of the fabula [story]), or outside it. If the focalizer coincides with the character, that character will have a technical advantage over the other characters. The reader watchesthrough the character's eyes and will mainly be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character." (Bal, 1985: 104)

His theory provides a relationship between the narrator who told the story, the focalizer that gives the point of view upon the action and the agent, that behaves as an author of the action.

Reducing this ample analysis to a simple form of understanding the focalization and without excluding Genette's contribution, the equation provides two types of focalization: the external and the internal focalization. External focalization is always heterodiegetic and it could belong to a narrator focalizer, who was renamed by Nieragden "heterodiegetic narratorial" (Nieragden, 2009: 691). The point of view upon the characters' action comes from the discourse level, where the exclusive master is the narrator. Otherwise, if the focalizer is not the narrator, but a character, then the focalization will be, according to Nieragden "heterodiegetic figural" (*ibidem.*). Here, the reader deals with two types of focalization from the discourse plan and from inside the story, therefore, the combination of internal with external focalization solves this problem. The situation seems to be completely different in case of the internal focalization, which could be discovered both in the heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration. Being a character or a simple viewer without having a role in the main narrative plot, imply to see the facts from the story level. In case of the autodiegetic context, the narrator is the character and the focalization on the discourse level (the narration plan) is overlapping with the story level (the narrated plan), and that allows identifying the same internal focalization. What is really interesting to review is the focalization variety within the same story, which depends on alternation of the plans and on how many narrators are involved as well. Speaking about this, Genette's contribution revealed us that a narration may develop a monofocalization, which he called "fixed focalization" (Genette, 1980: 189), or a multifocalization, called "variable focalization". The first one borrows the focalization from one of the characters, and the second one offers an alternation between several focalizers.

In the short conversation or oral narration, which might be considered non-conformist stories, just like in commercials or short movie, it is obvious that we refer to multi-focalization. The reason for this is the double perspective which consist in, firstly, the audio-visual plan, and, secondly, the action plan, where the focalization almost always belongs to the characters.

It would be easy to illustrate how this narrative concept works in advertising story, offering the example we have just analyzed above twice, from the narrative indices and narrator's point of view: *Schwab Investor*. The focalization is an external one, because it is closely related to the heterodiegetic narrator. The object of the focalization is the little girl's love dream and the subject of it (focalizer) is the mother who, in the end, offers her own perspective upon the present day: no time for dreaming and hopes if your business will not be coordinated by *Schwab Investor*. In the story plane, the character from the present becomes also his own focalizer, because the daughter sees herself over ages being happy and loved just like a princess. In this case we are facing two kinds of focalizers: the external one responsible for how an ideal life could be seen, and an internal one responsible for how the daughter imagines her life. When the fairy tale atmosphere vanishes, the external focalizer – mother – has already done the translation to an internal one referring to all women who have not yet asked for

Schwab Investor help, including herself. Obviously, the commercial persuades the customer by using a pessimistic vision or a negative influence, on one hand, and, on the other hand, by doing a comparison between a life that *Schwab Investor* will take care of and a life full of worries (without financial advisory).

3.3. The relationship between the narrator, characters and reader in advertising

This connection established between the main narrative instances takes into consideration the involvement of the reader in decoding the text, either from outside, or from inside. Everything depends on the distance between the story and its perception which is closely related to the horizontal or vertical relationships that we discussed at the beginning of this study.

Before we go on to apply the classification of the link between the storytelling agents, it is useful to introduce a distinction about the reader. Everyone knows what a reader is, what his activity consists in, but this description should be available only on the general levels, not specifically in the fiction world. The only explanation for this distinction between fictional and non-fictional world comes up again because of the distance between the text and its decoding, which needs to involve another concept: the narrator. Michael Toolan defines him in a very clear way as: “a person involved or detached from the story events, whom the narrator is speaking directly to” (Toolan, 2008: 114) Many times one of the characters is the narrator, a diegetic one, when the narrator is another character, he is speaking to him, considered an intradiegetic narrator. This narrator is emotionally involved and is sharing the narrator’s mirror upon the events. Some times, the narrator is a reader involved linguistically by using second verbal tense from time to time during the narration, including both of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration. There are few cases when the intradiegetic narrator becomes also a narrator, especially when he is doing a confession and the plot looks like a monologue about himself as a result of an internal and critic analysis.

When the narrator is involved in a verbal fictive narration, that is an interesting situation. We are talking about the cinematic method of displaying a story, similar to the movie display, available, as well, for ads. In this context, the narrator is invested with different degrees of autonomy. Most of the cases highlighted his status as a reflector of the main hero’s action. Therefore, he is wearing the hypostasis of an auditor, he is part of the public who is watching and listening to the hero. In this case we have an external narrator, who is the production viewer and supports the hero in an empathic way or not. From the inside “reading” of the narration, we have the type of witness-narrator.

Up to a certain point, this analysis is a common place for the world of ads because there comes up a special audience, who is the target, represented by the actual or the virtual customer. He is equally involved in the events, because the characters have to deal with the same problems. We have two levels of narrators: the first is represented

by the story narrator, the second one by the commercial watcher, who could be the consumer. The ad speaks directly to the potential buyer by using the face-to-face linguistic indices, which are second person verbs and pronouns.

Within the narrative story from *Schwab Investor* commercial, the double play of narrator-narrator is really exciting, because it makes the connection between the characters and the customers. The pronoun “you” stands in the middle of the whole conversation and embedding fairy tale, but with different meaning. First, it refers to the listener of the story, who is the daughter, second is the non-client of *Schwab Investor*, who has to cope with his financial problems. There is another artifice of the narrative structure, which regards the translation of the little girl into a future, mature (grown up) woman who could not have a better life without accepting the financial advice.

4. The connection between visual narration and words narration in advertising

Be it a radio/TV commercial or a print one, the storytelling is of high interest for the copywriter who is working on “the big idea”, which could sell the product or the service better. The narrativity is more complex in the video spot, where the information comes from three sources: the visual one, the audio and the verbal one, equally important for the commercial success. The advantage of TV narrative commercials relies on the high persuasive degree. Maswell & Dickman analyzed the most important elements of persuasion which help the consumer to keep in mind the right product’s positioning and concluded that the narrative background provides the consumer’s fidelity: “Context is king. We remember things better if we can associate them with things and patterns we already remember from the past, if they fall along mental pathways we are used to travel through. The most powerful and central pattern our minds have is the storytelling elements – passion, hero, antagonist, awareness, and transformation.” (Maswell & Dickman, 2007: 149) Until the product reaches the production arm, the commercial comes to life step by step by writing the script and drawing the storyboard, which illustrates both forms of narration, the audio-visual story and the verbal one. The storyboard should be created complementary to the script and has to highlight the visual dynamics for the story. There are non-verbal narrations that are telling a story by other narrative indices besides the visible story teller, such as: image sequencing, time, space, characters. “Slice of life” is the popular commercial format which develops a story starting with a solution for a problem that suddenly popped up in the consumer’s daily life. This way of displaying a product could be met in a commercial under others formats such as: testimonial, demonstration, fantasy land, simple conversation. We cannot talk about the autonomy of the image in a TV commercial, except for the silent films, because the verbal narration is entirely supported by the audio-video production. Therefore, the camera is the invisible author and the narrator is the editing man.

There are many techniques which help to tell the story by moving the camera in order to suggest the characters' action during the spot, such as shot size (medium, long shot, wide shot), close-up or tight shot, number of shots for the same scenes. The transition concept brings to light how a scene gets to another according with the narrative structure: "Transition terms tell the television director just how the commercial's creative team wants the progression of scenes to flow: 1) rapidly, in staccato fashion 2) lazily, in a sort of dream sequence, or 3) somewhere in between, perhaps a combination of the two in an alternating pattern". (Zeigler & Howard, 1984: 194). Transition cannot be noticed by the watcher from the technical point of view consisting in physical camera movement, but the optical motion could be carefully seen. A cut means, for example, suddenly changing a frame and dissolve refers to melting a scene into another step by step until it is completely replaced. A wipe suggests a rapid succession of scenes, by "pushing or sweeping one picture off the screen as a new one moves in." (*Ibidem*, p. 196) Time and space changes make the commercial running dynamically and keep up the watcher's attention.

In the following lines, we focus on the narrative indices of the already well known *Schwab Investor* commercial. The narrated plan, which is the fairy tale, provides many narrative examples in only a couple of seconds. This is why, our analysis concentrates on how the verbal narration manages to be visually compatible.

Time and space	Optical effects	Verbal story
The room where mother and little child live. Time – present, bed time	The close-up on the little girl face is dissolved into the scene with the princess, by overlapping the characters. The transition is fast.	LG: <i>Can you tell me a bed time story?</i>
Space – a forest, where the prince and the princess meet. Time: the future, when the characters meet for the first time	Cut on the scene where the prince takes the princess on his horse by closing-up the image with girl's face. Transition – quick	M: <i>Someday, when you grow up into a beautiful young lady, your knight will come, on a great white stallion.</i>
Space – the room Time – the present	Dissolving the scene from the woods into the scene with the zoom on the girl's face. Transition-quickly	LG: <i>Wow!...</i>
Space – trough the wood, close to a waterfall and the prince's castle Time – future is time of being in loved, while they are riding faster through wood.	Cut the scene with the girl and come back to the fairy tale. A fade used at the end of the frame makes the castle appear from nothing, form a dark background. Transition – quick	<i>And he'll sweep you off of your feet. And he will take you to a beautiful castle.</i>
Space-the room Time-present	Dissolve the scene with the castle into the scene with the girl listening to the story. Transition-quick	LG: <i>Really?</i>

Time and space	Optical effects	Verbal story
Space – the castle Time of getting married, the ceremony	The transition is done by using a wipe, which sweeps the scene with the girl in the marriage one, zooming the groom's hands and their kiss. Transition slowly.	M: <i>He will marry you and give you everything your heart desires, for ever and ever.</i>
Space – the room Time – bed time	Wipe technique by sweeping the previous scene. Transition quickly	No voice
Space – the castle Time – at the end of the kiss	Cut the girl's scene. The image focus is on the princess. Transition quickly.	No voice
Space – the room, on the computer Time – the end of the story	Cut the story definitively. Focus on mom's face. Wipes are changing faster the camera back and from mom to the daughter.	M: <i>Of course, if it doesn't work out, you will need to understand the difference between a P ratio and a dividend yield, and a growth evaluation strategy.</i> <i>When we created a smarter type of investment firm, we created a smarter kind of investor.</i> <i>With online tools like a new Stock Explorer, which can teach you investment strategy, to help you build your own castle. To get your free sample of Stock Explorer, visit Schwab.com and click on...</i>

5. Decoding commercials by a content analysis upon the narrating instances

5.1. Research methodology:

The main corpus of our research contains 40 audio-video spots. We selected them on various grounds. First of all, these ads tell us a story about different products and services that could be found on the Romanian market. Therefore, the plot adapts to the Romanian lifestyle, especially because we are speaking about daily stories which describe various happenings. The brands we have chosen are representative for many product categories such as: phones and communications (*Vodafone, Germanos, Posta Romana, Cosmote*), alcoholic drinks (beer- *Bergenbier, Bucegi, Timișoreana, Ciucaș* and vine-*Murfatlar*), soft drinks (*Sprite, Tymbark*), dairy products (*Tnuva, Milli, Napolact, Napoca, Danone*), coffee (*Jakobs*), water (*Izvorul Minunilor*), cars (*Dacia*), cosmetics (shampoo - *Head & Shoulders*), food (*Banat Bun, Scandia, Untdelemn, Principal porc, Delikat*), detergents (*Tide*), IT software (*Windows 7*), medicines (*Memo Plus*), TV channel (*MTV*), chips (*Lays*), press products (*Ciao*), banks and financial services (*Citi financial, CEC*). We purposely looked for narrative commercials that belong to different categories in order to get to the valid conclusions.

Our purpose in this research is to see how the narrative instances influence the brand image according to the story telling techniques. Actually, our interest is focusing on the relationship between the story's hero, narrator and the consumer. We have purposely chosen different formats of spot and the only criteria was to represent daily life in a spectacular dynamic way, which allows us to easily identify the narrative structures.

We have driven our research by quantitative and qualitative analysis. Our basic hypothesis is that advertising uses narrative instances in order to better involve the brand and the product in the customer's life. Obviously, the main argument is to offer more credibility to both the brand and the product, to strengthen the trust of their customers, too.

We have used, in our analysis, the following variables, and conceived them as questions we are looking the answer for.

Q₁ - Who is the narrator of the story?

Q₂ - What kind of focalization does the commercial have?

Q₃ - How is the image narration compatible with the verbal narration?

Q₄ - What kind of format does the commercial have?

Q₅ - Whose story does the commercial tell?

5.2. The quantitative research results and the quantitative analysis

Q₁ - Who is the narrator of the story?

The quantitative research reveals data according to the narrator classification which refers to the autodiegetic narrator, the homodiegetic and the heterodiegetic one. In the first situation, the voice speaks in the first person, being one of the characters who gets completely involved in the story. The homodiegetic narration implies using the second person verb, and the narrator is supposed to be a witness to the events, but he is not responsible for their deployment. The last one says the story from the angle of an objective person, using the third person verb, and seeing the facts from outside, just like an omniscient voice. As a result of the quantitative data, related to the sample we choose, the narrators' distribution seems to look like this:

- The autodiegetic narrator represents 52,5% from the whole corpus.
- The heterodiegetic narrator covers 32,5% of the analyzed sample.
- The homodiegetic narrator is less illustrated here by only 15%

Q₂ - What kind of focalization do commercials have?

Regarding the focalization's type, the information does the connection with the previous data, because the analysis is organized on two main levels: the external focalization and the internal one. The first one tells the story from inside, having or borrowing the characters' point of view. Coming back again to Genette, the external focalization matches the heterodiegetic narration, and everything is told from the discourse plan, not from the story inside. Here, the percentage is 37,5, which is quite

close to the heterodiegetic narrator (32,5%), but the biggest contribution regards the internal focalization – 62,5%. The inside point of view may describe the characters' implication, either actors, or simple witnesses. The perspective upon the facts is subjective, but also reflects everything is happening in the story plan. This majority percentage focused on intra-diegesis is a sign of the visible relationships between the characters' perspective and the consumer's needs. Another interesting aspect resulted from the previous statistic is the focalization variation in the same story, meaning that, at least, two perspectives could be identified among the events. The single focalization is dominant, with 72,5%, that makes sense when we connect it with the autodiegetic narrators. The character, who concentrates on his own experience and life, cannot suddenly change the focalization upon himself/herself, especially when it is about the narrator and what he says is the same with what he sees and lives. The multiple focalization relies, basically, on several of reasons for its 27,5%:

- √ First, the variation often reflects the **dialogue between the characters**, each of them having a different perspective upon the events. In order to justify this focalization, we take into consideration the commercial for *Citi financial*, whose plot is finding money for a wedding. Friends and relatives try to find partial solutions for helping the grooms: someone wants to help the bright with the wedding dress, someone else with advice from his own experience. Finally, the father answers the questions: "When is the wedding?" in a very ironic way: "Don't worry: you will be invited!" The hetero-diegetic narrator shows up at the end and concludes by making the huge distinction between friendly help and the bank's help: "The friends help you their own way. But for money, you have to call *Citi financial* or to come to the credit stores."
- √ Second, multifocalization means telling the story, sometimes, by more than one narrator, who offers their own version related to the event which the characters are interested in. For example, the spot for *Bucegi* beer, called *The Legend*, shares two stories with identical structure to the watcher. A shepherd tells the legend of the Bucegi stones to some tourists, and this is the link to the origin of the *Bucegi* beer. The same situation is available for the spot *Danone -10 years*, where the dynamism and the narration come only from the images, the verbal background does not exist at all. The focalization changes the perspective according to the scenes and the characters. It is about three different situations developed at the same time, but in different spaces, and around various characters: a man is running after the bus, because his bag has been caught in its doors, a biker is chased by dogs, a broken car is pushed up by some girls. Focalization can be described as the way the main characters see their life reality and take part in their own unlucky incidents. Of course, all of three focalizations types are convergent, even if the focalizer changes scene by scene.
- √ The distance in time away from the events affords changing the perspective of the same characters but living different age. *Napolact* commercials created a

story where the image upon the product and brand is changed by the age: being young means not to appreciate the time of having a rest, while a mature person dreams about having a break. Using analepse, the character goes back to the time of his childhood, seeing everything from the past perspective, but coming back to his present way of understanding life: *Once, I wouldn't have rested for a second. What snack break? What afternoon nap? Now I'd give anything for... a reason for a break...*

Q₃ - How is the image narration compatible with the verbal narration?

The image always has a special role in reading the entire message of a movie or a spot. In advertising, it is one of the most effective means to draw the customer's attention by special effects or developing a story in a very creative and attractive way. For this reason, there are several possible relationships between the image narration and the verbal one, fact that proves how the production work reflected the copywriters' effort.

The first one is **the simultaneity of the image** established among the entire story, meaning that each sentence is completely synchronized with the image. The spot for the brand *Milli*, called *The Peasant* gives us an appropriate example for what this compatibility means.

Verbal: *My name is Grigoraş Valentin. When I was 14, I came from Braşov to my grandmother.*

[Image: the grandson comes to the grandmother who is very happy and she welcomes him in the door of the house]

Verbal: *I started raising animals. First for my own pleasure.*

[Image: the character is working in the field, preparing the fodder]

Verbal: *My grandmother had a cow and a calf. Now I have 24 animals.*

[Image: he is working in the stable, taking care of his animals]

Verbal: *For one year, Milli purchased my milk and with their help I made my work easier, because I bought a milking machine.*

[Image: The sheep go to pasture, just like any regular day].

Verbal: *The milk is much cleaner.*

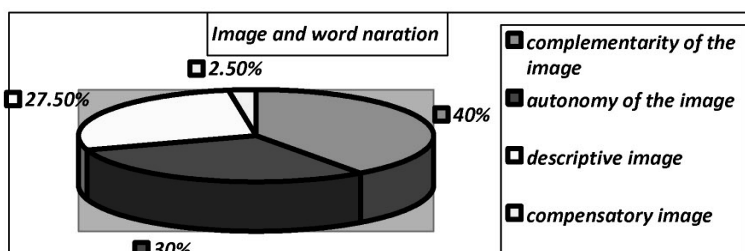
[Image: Grigoraş is presented in front of the house with his wife and his grandmother. They are dressed in traditional outfits].

The second situation regards **the image autonomy**, which actually replaces the verbal narration, because words are useless when the scenes are more than relevant. We are provided a better explanation for the same spot *Danone - 10 years* that we have already spoken about. The image shows how the characters are passing their difficulties through running after bus, riding the bike quickly because of the aggressive dogs behind him, trying to push the car up. No text, only the parallel movement of the heroes, accompanied by the Maria Tănase song, *Ciuleandra*.

In many cases, the image offers a **descriptive background** for telling the story, just like on a stage where the characters play their roles dynamically. Usually the description/depiction highlights the products' quality or the customer, as it is happening in the spot called *Memo Plus*, where the image presents the consumers (young students) exhausted because of the exams, and falling asleep at the place where they are supposed to learn. The text explains the background: *For those who are learning the night before the exam , for those who have just begun to read, underlining, memorizing, for those who the future finds tired and wringed... you have to learn to sleep well in order to enjoy your student time. Memoplus - a good help for easier learning.*

The last situation happens, in our opinion, accidentally, because it is quite rare to have a spot where the image tells the story faster than the words, and the verbal dimension jumps over the events. *Murfatlar - the vineyard* choose this kind of telling the story, because the images transmit the facts agglomeration in time that cannot be told in the rhythm of the memory. The grandson remembers the grandfather and father's experience in vineyard and their sacrifice (the war, the detention, the death) for keeping the tradition alive. The sad memories come from the core of the narrator's past, who was only just a child by the time of his fathers' sacrifice. This type of relationship could be called **image compensation**, because the verbal information is accomplished by its support.

To sum up this detailed analysis, the association between image and verbal narration distribution in our corpus looks as depicted below:



Q₄ - What kind of format do the commercials have?

The commercials format always reflects the way of telling the story, regarding the relations established between the narrative instances. There are several types defined by the number of the story characters, by time of narration, narrators' involvement and experience type. We can talk about several models met in our corpus, such as: demonstration, testimonial and biography, slice of life, conversation, special effects commercial, story-telling (legend, fairy tale and history). In either situation, the story emerges from organization of the plot around the characters and the actions they are involved in. As a result of our quantitative research, we found, as we expected, very similar data, from the hierarchical point of view. A simple re-organization of information reveals that on the top of the pyramid is the story-telling format,

represented by 10 commercials (25%). Then, on the second place, the testimonials and biography are well represented, by 22, 5% followed closely by the conversation with 20%. Less important according to their number are the ads created as slice of life (15%) and the demonstration format as well (12,5%). Last place is taken by special effects commercial, where the narration comes from graphic and animation effects, weaving the media formats (print and TV features of the commercials support) in two examples (*Untdelemn de la bunica* and *Nurofen pentru copii*) which means only 5%. In a broader sense, at the core of the narrative structure are different formats of story, such as legends (*Izvorul Minunilor*, *Bucegi*) and history (*Timișoreana*, *Windows 7*, *Poșta Română*), which explained the connection between the narrator and the narrators, while the testimonials shows the autodiegetic supremacy (52,5%) proven by the telling of the story in the first-person. The testimonials are based only on internal focalization, but history and legend weave the objective with the subjective perspective.

Q₅ - Whose story does the commercial tell?

How important it is who the story is dedicated to and who becomes the subject of the plot brings to light the inside relationship between the communication commercial instances: consumer – character – product – brand. Everyone knows that beyond everything, the commercial speaks to the consumer, in order to persuade him to buy the product, but it is not necessary to do it directly, involving the possible buyer in the story, not only as a simple hero. The brand, the product, or any of the characters could be the core of the story as well. Our statistic is quite relevant from this point of discussion, taking into account that, although the main story owner is the customer in 22 commercials from the whole corpus (55%), in 10 ads (25%) we still have ad spots where the plot develops around the main characters. Telling the product's story does not take a big percentage (15%), while weaving the story around the brand image happens only in two situation (5%), when it is about its history (*Windows 7*, *Poșta Română*).

Therefore, the consumer gets involved in the story, by using the product or expressing the need to solve his problem with the help of the product. The customer either looks for a faster solution for his emergency (*Nurofen* – medicine for pain, *Tide* – detergent) or proves the necessity of the product in his life daily (*Dacia*, *Danone*, *Delikat*). In most of the cases, the hero speaks to the possible and future customer sharing his opinion by proving the product's credibility.

Conclusions:

To sum up our demonstration, it is more than obvious that the commercial relies on a very strong narrative articulation, which explains the relations established between the customer, the brand and the product. The narrative play reveals how important who tells the story and from which point of view is. The subjective narration, developed around an internal focalization and an autodiegetic storyteller, has as a main advantage raising the credibility of the message by following the characters while

they are getting involved in solving a particular problem. The TV viewer becomes sympathetic with the ad character and he is integrated step by step into the story. Using the second-person verb during the narration, the ad viewer is perceived as a narrator who receives the message directly in this way. At the beginning, he is placed in the witness' shoes and then he might identify himself with the product's consumer from the story. The simultaneity established between the image and word helps the ad viewer to trust the promised product, as a result of the concrete representation of its advantages.

Therefore, the internal focalization, many times out coming from the autodiegetic and homodiegetic narrator, could be very well brought to light by the testimonial narrations, whose core is the life story of a character, while the heterodiegetic narrator confers to the classic story-tellings, like fairy-tale, legend, history, a special aura given by the myth of coming back to the product and brand origins. Both of them are an authentic sign of narrativity in commercial creation and give to the future buyer the chance to integrate the product in his own life, as a result of his ability of telling a story in a very attractive way.

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