

Sociosemiotics of Advertising: Experiences, Themes and Perspectives

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Summary. This paper aims to retrace the main stages of sociosemiotics of advertising in Italy, from the influence of French semiotics to the interdisciplinary dialogue with marketing and sociology of consumption. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the main research themes explored by the sociosemiotics of advertising in Italy, such as: the language of food, in its multiple and complex dimensions; the representation of family models; the semiotic analysis of practices and, in particular, of consumption practices; the study of crisis communication, with specific reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper then shows how, over the last ten years, sociosemiotics in Italy has been characterised by a particular attention to the analysis of social texts and how these studies are connected to the structuralist and generative approach of Greimasian semiotics: hence a series of tools to identify the dominant values, the narrative and discursive structures recurring within the texts, with the aim to grasp the representations of the social, the images of everyday life, the changing interactions between society and advertising texts.

Keywords. Semiotics, sociosemiotics, advertising, consumption, text analysis

Zusammenfassung. Dieser Artikel hat zum Ziel, die Hauptetappen der soziosemiotischen Werbeforschung in Italien nachzuzeichnen, beginnend mit dem Einfluss der französischen Semiotik bis hin zum interdisziplinären Dialog mit den Bereichen Marketing und Soziologie des Konsums. Darüber hinaus liegt der Fokus des Artikels auf den zentralen Forschungsthemen, die von der soziosemiotischen Werbeforschung in Italien untersucht werden, wie beispielsweise die Sprache der Nahrung in all ihren vielfältigen und komplexen Dimensionen, die Darstellung von Familienmodellen, die semiotische Analyse von Praktiken, insbesondere von Konsumpraktiken, sowie die Untersuchung der Krisenkommunikation mit speziellem Bezug auf die COVID-19-Pandemie. Der Artikel verdeutlicht zudem, wie sich die italienische Soziosemiotik in den letzten zehn Jahren durch eine ausgeprägte Beachtung der Analyse sozialer Texte auszeichnet und wie diese Studien mit dem strukturalistischen und generativen Ansatz der Greimaschen Semiotik verknüpft sind. Hierbei kommen verschiedene Methoden zum Einsatz, um

dominante Werte, narrative und diskursive Strukturen innerhalb der Texte zu identifizieren. Ziel ist es, die Darstellungen des Sozialen, die Bilder des Alltagslebens sowie die sich wandelnden Wechselwirkungen zwischen Gesellschaft und Werbetexten zu erfassen.

Schlüsselwörter. Semiotik, Soziosemiotik, Werbung, Verbrauch, Textanalyse

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Sixties, the science of signification has shown a great interest in advertising, for its communicative objectives as well as for the linguistic and expressive mechanisms that regulate it. The first semiological studies were interested in analysing the rhetorical strategies implemented by advertising. The linguistic and semiological gaze on advertising, supported by the notions of rhetoric, goes beyond the idea of commercial communication as a hidden persuasion. We recall the first analyses conducted in this regard by Roland Barthes (1964) and, in Italy, by Umberto Eco (1968).¹ In these studies, the rhetorical devices are considered as techniques for multiplying the meanings of the text, and for placing next to the denoted content, which is provided by the linguistic code, many other possible connotated meanings, that refer to cultural universes or sub-codes of ideological, anthropological, or aesthetic types. The use of rhetoric in advertising allows us to process the advertising text as a machine that has different levels of meaning, the linguistic and the visual, interacting with each other but different in terms of communicative effectiveness.²

Starting from the Seventies, the rhetorical models are replaced by logical-narrative models, which in the advertising field began to spread also in Italy at the beginning of the Nineties, thanks to the studies of Jean-Marie Floch (1990). In fact, there is a need to replace the semiological analysis adopted in the Sixties and Seventies, that identified signs to be classified in appropriate rhetorical rubrics, with a semiotic gaze that searches for the text structures that lie beneath the signs, to reconstruct the internal logic and the components of the entire advertising communication. Thus, the advertising text does not present as many messages as there are expressive substances used by it, but it emits a single message that grounds its unity in the deep structures of the narrative type of text. Advertising is not so much a rhetorical form of persuading the consumer to buy certain products, as a procedure for enhancing both the products and the brand-image that supports them. The concept of value becomes central:³ the consumer attributes values to the products and, in the same way, the consumer's identity is determined each time on the basis of the valorisations associated to the objects.

Towards the end of the Eighties, another approach to the study of advertising begins to take shape. Advertising is no longer seen only as a textu-

al mechanism, whose functioning and internal structuring criteria must be identified, but as a discourse able to act in the reality that surrounds it, interacting with it. Advertising is part of social reality, one of its constituent components and actively contributes to determining the dynamics of society. Therefore, the path of a sociosemiotics of advertising begins to be followed, for which advertising is a social discourse among other social discourses, such as the political, journalistic, economic discourses, and so on. We no longer dwell on how advertising represents reality, because it is part of reality, acts in it and transforms it. Advertising must be thought of as a discourse that “says” and “does”, that represents and modifies, where every word is a strategic move, and every action has a significant value (Marrone 2001: 154). Consequently, we do not bother to analyse the advertised products from the point of view of their material components, but we focus on the intangible and symbolic components of the objects, on those aspects that can be enhanced by potential consumers.

In this essay we will try to retrace the main stages of the sociosemiotics of advertising in Italy, from the influence of French semiotics to the contacts with sociology of consumption and marketing. Further, we will focus on the main themes explored in Italian sociosemiotics of advertising, to then conclude the paper with an overview on the most recent trends related to the spread of digital marketing and advertising on social networks.

2. The influence of French semiotics

As prefigured by Greimas in several of his writings (Greimas and Courtés 1979), sociosemiotics asserted itself in France thanks to some works by Landowski (1989) and in Italy following the studies of Ferraro (1999), Marrone (2001), Pozzato (2001), Semprini (2003), Pezzini (2008). These studies laid the foundations for what would become the Italian sociosemiotics of advertising.

In particular, the Italian sociosemiotics of advertising can be placed in the context of the “spectacular semiotics”⁴, interested in studying the way in which society is reflected in the texts and, by observing itself “in the mirror”, it changes. The basic idea is that between social reality and the discourses that represent it there is a mirror-image relationship of reciprocal influence. The theoretical presupposition of “spectacular semiotics” is that social phenomena are considered to be languages in all respects. Sociosemiotics is not interested in verifying the way in which society is reflected in the language, or the way in which language accounts for society. Rather, it focuses on social phenomena – media, fashion, advertising, new technologies, spaces, politics, etc. – as mechanisms of signification, articulated universes of meaning. In other words, social phenomena must not be translated into language, but they must be considered as languages, entities already endowed with meaning (Marrone 2001: XVI–XVII). In these terms, the sociosemiotics of advertising will be the analysis of the consump-

tion models proposed by the advertising texts. As stated by Marrone (2001: 176), product and consumer are constituted in their reciprocal relationship, a relationship that is proposed by the advertising story in different ways each time, on the basis, on the one hand of the economic conditions of the market, and on the other of the wishes circulating in the imagination social of the moment.

Therefore, the Italian sociosemiotics of advertising is in continuity with the studies on sociosemiotics conducted in France by Landowski, many of which are contained in the book *La société réfléchie: essais de socio-sémiotique* (1989). As pointed out by Landowski (1989), the advertising discourse is a privileged place for staging certain social relationships. In the advertising text, a company or a public institution must configure its audience and stage the type of relationship they want to establish with it. With precise enunciative strategies, a sender can enter directly into the message, or he can prepare an apparently neutral and objective text. Indeed, advertising portrays both the “desirable” objects and the “desiring” subjects. The text constitutes the identity of its audience by giving shape to its desires.

Analysing a corpus of institutional advertisements, Landowski (1989: 137) notes the presence of two discursive logics: the “logic of purchase”, which, like brand communication, intends to propose objects to be purchased, and the “logic of the contract”, which instead tends to create cooperative relationships between sender and receiver. If the first is based on a commercial activity (it technically specifies the customer’s needs and the products to be offered), the second builds a discourse based on the idea of “being”. The two communication logics can coexist, or the institution can communicate with its public choosing one of them, depending on the contexts and strategies. According to Landowski, indeed, two types of customers can be imagined and therefore inscribed in the institutional advertising discourse: an independent clientele, already informed, which is therefore driven by a purchase request; and customers who are uncertain and in search of their own identity, dependent and to be informed, therefore sensitive to the call of a partnership bond based on the discourse of “being”, rather than that of “doing”. By setting up the advertising discourse in one way or another, the institutions create narrative grammar and stage intersubjective relationships. Most of the time, Landowski notes, the two logics coexist because the simulacrum of the public that one intends to inscribe in the discourse, and therefore to “manipulate”, is not always clear. In these cases, advertising systematically oscillates between the two options.

Landowski’s sociosemiotics is the basis of the study conducted by Semprini (1996) on Benetton communication. Semprini identifies different phases of Benetton advertising: the “prehistoric phase” (1966–1983), the “cycle of difference” (1984–1985), the “cycle of equality” (1986–1991), the “cycle of death” (1991–1992), the “cycle of truth” (1993), and the “cycle of blood” (1993–1994). According to Semprini (1996), the Benetton advertising campaign directed by Oliviero Toscani can be read as an attempt by the advertising discourse to occupy positions within the social discourse that were

previously foreign to it. A similar trend is already visible in the Benetton press advertisements and posters of the mid-Eighties, in which ethical and social issues, such as racial differences and integration, begin to be represented. These advertisements arouse amazement in a social context such as that of the time, dominated by contrary communicative tendencies, aimed at amusing, surprising and spectacularising everyday life. However, it was in the two-year period 1991–1992 that Benetton advertisements reached the culmination of this communication path, in the phase that Semprini calls “the cycle of death”. The images are aggressive, violent, show pain, death and desolation. A realistic code of representation is chosen through agency photos that show images of bloody, dramatic and “real” events: the desperation of refugees forced to abandon their means of transport, a soldier gripping a human thigh bone, a burning car, a man murdered in the street by the mafia. With this campaign, the brand renounces to bring an ideal world to life and focuses on those events in front of which all men are equal: life and death. These advertisements aroused harsh controversy. The most contested image was that of a young American, terminally ill with AIDS, photographed dying in his bed, surrounded by a crying family.

The Benetton campaign can be analysed from the point of view of its positioning in the social discursive system and it is interesting to note how in this case the advertising discourse has attempted to invade themes and values (political, medical, religious values) that traditionally belonged to other discursive regimes such as for example the journalistic one. In this game of erosion of spaces and re-negotiation of discursive boundaries, the overall system is modified. For instance, the journalistic could be hybridised by an advertising style. To stand out and be successful, however, a statement must defeat difficult attacks. This is why the sociosemiotic gaze must analyse the metadiscursive conditions through which the remarks are legitimised in the space of social discursiveness. There are “true” statements that fail to legitimise themselves as social discourses and “false” statements that manage to impose themselves in the semiosphere. Semprini (2003: 22) states that the history of communication is full of examples of this kind. Often more than “what is said” counts “who said it” and “how it is said”: the performative effect is much more linked to the legitimacy of the enunciator than to the truth of the utterance.

If it is true that brand communication today is characterised by a substantial lack of specificity, as it moves further and further away from the product and stages possible worlds that are considered attractive, it should be noted the cases of some big brands that impose themselves in the discursive universe with absolutely innovative strategies. An example is the Adidas “I kiss football” campaign, built around the character Sonny, a young football fan, born in Africa and became famous in Europe thanks to his passion for this sport. It is, as Ferraro (2003) argues, an intermediary campaign, in the sense that it makes the television video interact with the website on the net. The video begins with images of Sonny in Africa (he is filmed while playing with a ball on the beach), then his contacts with the world of European foot-

ball are described, followed by his notoriety in the media. Lastly, the Adidas brand took the stage to sanction its real and media success by choosing Sonny as its testimonial. Beyond the technical aspects, Ferraro chooses the Adidas case to say that the big brands no longer produce the advertising event but use their power and their economic capacity to bring to attention something that has developed autonomously. According to Ferraro (2003: 179), the logic of the operation conceived by Adidas is quite clear: gaining visibility for oneself by working on the visibility of something or someone whose existence and value is (or pretends to be) completely independent from the brand. The brand assumes “the discourse of others”: it does not build advertising but makes use of discourses that circulate in the semiosphere, decides to sponsor, to feed to organise, and to distribute them. Adidas shows the power of choice, of selection, and does so semiotically by installing itself in the discourse as an actor able to sanction and to exhibit power.

A recent example is an advertisement of the “Made in Bangladesh” campaign, launched in 2014 by the clothing brand American Apparel (Boero 2017). The protagonist of the campaign is a 22-year-old model of Bangla origin, Maks, who fled her country at the age of four. In the photo, the girl is wearing only a pair of jeans; her naked breasts are only partially covered by the words “Made in Bangladesh”, in black and in bold. The photo has a neutral and bare background, which highlights the represented subject. The main textual part, characterised by the words “Made in Bangladesh”, is based on a linguistic game of polyvalence: on the one hand it indicates the geographical origin of the model but, on the other, it draws attention to Bangladesh and the exploitation of indigenous workers of the manufacturing sector, forced to work exhausting shifts and with negligible wages. Below, in the body copy, the company has chosen to include Maks’s personal story: from when, as a child, she decided to leave her country until arriving in California, where, according to the girl’s words, she found her own identity. The “Made in Bangladesh” advertising campaign is part of a corpus already marked by numerous advertising operations widely contested by the public opinion: from shots portraying children as highly “sexualised” subjects to the mannequins exposed with false pubic hair. In this case the advertising discourse tends to overlap the ethical and religious one, passing from provocation to social denunciation. The complaint is aimed primarily at the precarious conditions of the workforce in Bangladesh, the first country in the world for the large-scale production of bras and the second largest producer of clothing in the world. Secondly, the selection of a young immigrant who fled Bangladesh and its religious restrictions as a brand ambassador testifies to the company’s desire to support the fight against Islamic fundamentalism and promote individual freedom in all its expressions, including sexual freedom.

The sociosemiotic gaze is therefore fixed on the social inscription of meaning, on the construction of meanings as objects of social conflict, power, constitution, or dissolution, of groups and positions, on the permanent battle to be able to assume, legitimise and make a discursive position

true, on the relationship between discursive formations and systems of belief, value, ideology. In this sense the sociosemiotic gaze has as its vocation the critical analysis of current society, where the main object of the analysis is no longer the traditional categories of historicistic, political or sociological analysis, but those of the communicative universe (Semprini 2003: 23). The construction of legitimacy is particularly important for the corporate world and in particular for the world of brands, where it is essential to gain a place in the social discourse system and maintain a certain level of credibility (Traini 2008).

3. Contacts with marketing and with the sociology of consumption

Since the early 2000s, the Italian sociosemiotics of advertising has established a fruitful dialogue with both marketing and sociology of consumption. Hence a series of contributions interested in investigating the possibilities of intersection with the disciplines mentioned above. Indeed, as highlighted by Codeluppi (2020: 79), advertising is a complex language and to analyse the meanings expressed by this type of communication it is necessary to resort to the contribution of different disciplines.

As for the relations with the marketing field, we can trace the bases in some works by Jean-Marie Floch, who at the beginning of the Nineties collected a series of interesting studies on this subject in the book *Sémiotique, marketing et communication. Sous les signes, les stratégies* (1990). We can remember in particular the essay “*J’aime, j’aime, j’aime...*” *Publicité automobile et système des valeurs de consommation* in which, applying the tools of generative semiotics to a set of advertising texts in the automotive sector, he shows the possibility of dialogue between semiotics and marketing: this opens the way to what would become the semiotics of advertising and consumption. At the basis of these studies there are the theoretical and analytical tools made available by Greimasian semiotics, such as the semiotic square, through which it is possible to reconstruct a typology of the possible forms that advertising communication uses to enhance the objects it must advertise. Hence the axiology of consumption values⁵, which still today, after thirty years, is the basis of numerous investigations conducted on advertising from a semiotic point of view (Boero ed. 2020). In this regard, we recall the works of Grandi (1994), Ceriani (2001, 2007, 2018), Bianchi (2005), Finocchi (ed. 2006), Bianchi and Ragonese (2013), Peverini (2017), who developed Greimasian methods and tools for the analysis of advertising and marketing communication. Marrone (2007) extends these reflections to the semiotic study of the brand, suggesting going beyond the idea of schematic narrativity, on which many analyses of semiotic application to advertising and marketing discourse have also been based, to look at forms of subjectivity and experience more related to affectivity, esthesia, corporeality, or towards the sphere of forms of life and the rhythms of transformation of social behaviour. Recently, Bianchi and Cosenza (eds. 2020)

edited a volume dedicated to digital communication, collecting a series of contributions centred on the possibilities of dialogue between semiotics and digital marketing, from Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) activities to new branding strategies in business communication.

If on the one hand semiotics looks at the world of marketing, at its objects of study and its methods of investigation, on the other it is the world of marketing and business communication that focuses on the descriptive language and investigation tools of semiotics. We find some examples in the works on consumer experience by Ferraresi and Schmitt (2007), on brand communication by Musso (2005), on consumption practices and new marketing trends, also with reference to local brands, by Qualizza (2006). The advertising universe thus reveals itself as a large machine that takes from the collective imagination already existing situations, desires or needs and transforms them internally for its own specific communication objectives, translates them in stories of Subjects that, in order to realise themselves, go in search of the most diverse Objects, in which the most diverse social values are inscribed. The semiotic analysis of advertising thus becomes a real social investigation into the motivations of consumption, with the task of finding underneath this apparent diversity of the world, a series of narrative constants, of invariant forms of enhancement of Objects by Subjects.

In addition to marketing, sociosemiotics in Italy maintains a fruitful dialogue with the sociological studies, because they share a common interest in investigating the consumption system. One of the scholars who most traveled the path of dialogue between sociology and sociosemiotics is Vanni Codeluppi who, in various books and papers (2001, 2010, 2020), has shown interest in the semiotic method for analysing social and cultural phenomena. In particular, Codeluppi has deepened the discourse of consumer practices in various works, as well as the study of advertising in an analytical perspective, able to grasp the potential benefits deriving from an interdisciplinary dialogue. Thus, in the essay *Semiotica e pubblicità: il problema della marca* (2020), he recognises the usefulness of the sociosemiotic approach in the study of advertising, an approach that considers texts as expressive tools, capable of producing representations, but also as discourses able to act on reality and to produce symbolic meanings. This leads to an analysis of the role actually played by texts in society, in other words, the ability of the texts to act and contribute to the process of building social reality. We also recall the works by Fabris on the postmodern consumer (2003) and on societing (2008), where often there are references to semiotics and to the need to extend the sociological gaze towards the semiotic metalanguage, and those of Polesana (2016, 2020), who conducted investigations very close to the semiotic field, insisting on the relevance of the concept of value in brand communication policies.

Precisely by virtue of this convergence of interest in the same objects of investigation, sociosemiotics has sometimes been confused with sociology. Marrone (2017), in the introduction to the essay *Le comunicazioni di massa in Italia: sguardo semiotico e malocchio della sociologia* by Paolo

Fabbri, specifies the difference between the two approaches. If on the one hand, in various ways, the methodological theme is present in the sociological discipline, and on this the dialogue with semiotics could at least in principle be easier, what keeps the two approaches distant, requiring the construction of adequate connections, is the question of the object: given as evidence for sociology, and constructed as a heuristic problem, instead, for semiotics (Marrone 2017: 13).

This distinction can be summarised by the passage “from facts to meaning”. As explained by Fabbri (1973), when sociology turns its attention to mass communications it is forced to deal with the problem of meaning, which in communication processes is constitutively present. In other words, upstream of the processes of communicative transmission there are also procedural mechanisms for the construction of meaning, whose coding and decoding agents are social subjects in all respects. Only in these terms it will be possible to speak of a sociosemiotics, that seems to be the normal continuation of a sociology of the media based on the structural principles of semiotics.

So even if the two disciplines maintain interest in the same objects of investigation, the approach with which they address them changes. Two disciplines, consequently, close together, able to work synergistically but with distinct approaches. It follows that sociosemiotics does not study the social directly, as sociology does by dealing with empirical phenomena linked to lived life, but deals with social phenomena as effects of meaning: semiotically, indeed, the social is not an empirical datum, the more or less hidden laws of which must be revealed, but an effect of constructed sense of which it is necessary to identify the constitutive procedures (Marrone 2001: XVI–XVII).

Therefore, the concreteness of social reality, for semiotics, is anything but immediate and the hypothesis is that it always has to do with constructed objects. If on the one hand sociosemiotics turns its gaze towards the empirical concreteness of social experiences, on the other it diverges from the social sciences considering empirical concreteness as rigorously mediated. Ultimately, the context is a language like any other: without privileges, ontological primitives or logical priorities, it is culturally constructed in the interaction with other languages (Traini 2008: 169). According to this perspective, the social is made up of texts and discourses that are translated and that, when translated, are reconstructed, each translation depending on the relative strategies of specific languages. For example, newspapers can talk about a day on the stock exchange, or a religious event, or a fashion event, but by telling it they translate it into a language that has specific rules and that responds to precise strategies. Similarly, a television program can talk about the consumption practices of a community, or a series of decisions made by the government, and in this way, it translates texts into its specific language.

The same thing happens for advertising. It can tell something about the society in which it is produced, placing itself as a text and translates other texts with other specific languages. The idea that there are real events

on the one hand and discourses on events on the other is replaced by the hypothesis that there is a continuous textual exchange that creates social meanings. The texts are the centre of these exchanges, in the sense that both events and discourses about events are considered languages with meaning. The central nucleus of sociosemiotics is therefore the social space of signification.

4. Themes

The sociosemiotics of advertising in Italy has been directed towards some predominant research themes. The survey that we present in this paragraph does not intend to be exhaustive of all the research lines undertaken but intends to provide an overview of the most explored areas over the last ten years.

A first research field undertaken by Italian semiologists is that of food: food – in the specific sense (particular foods) or in the broad sense (meal-times) – represented by advertising texts; commercials about food; behavioural practices that revolve around the time of meals or the preparation of dishes. One of the first studies was conducted in this regard by Semprini and Musso (2001). The authors analysed a corpus of Barilla pasta advertising, proposing a reinterpretation of the Greimasian generative trajectory of meaning. The goal was to highlight the changes in the discursive and narrative elements of the brand's advertising communication, despite the stability of the underlying values over time. Such changes, from a sociosemiotic point of view, are explained precisely by the need to follow the changes in society and, sometimes, to anticipate them. Indeed, advertising and society interact and influence each other. All the representative codes of an era are found in advertising texts and, consequently, advertising becomes a testimony of the society of that era. From this point of view, the preparation of pasta becomes a moment of conviviality around which interpersonal relationships are outlined, families, groups of friends gather, thus also communicating a specific idea of family and society. Barilla advertisements were also at the centre of a semiotic analysis by Stano (2012), who found out that advertising also contributes to the construction of a specific idea of Italian-ness, and by Zannin (2003), who proposed a reinterpretation of the Greimasian generative trajectory of meaning, highlighting the fundamental role of passions in advertising narration. In this regard, more recently, Paris (2020) has reflected on the ways of representing Italianness in the world, through the analysis of an advertising commercial in the automotive sector.

Still on the theme of food, in continuity with the studies by Marrone (2014) and the research group on the semiotics of food and taste of the University of Palermo (Marrone and Giannitrapani eds. 2013), Ventura Bordenca (2015) conducted an investigation concerning the role of food within advertising narratives. In her essay, children's food advertisements are considered as a mirror of culture and consumption, of the nutritionist phi-

losophy that has characterised the last fifty years. The same nutrients, says the author, change in value depending on the historical period. In the Sixties, pasta for children was sold with the addition of gluten or milk, in the belief that these two elements were more energetic for the intellectual or physical development of the child. Today, many products, even for children, are sold gluten-free, under the opposite belief that this protein is not entirely good for the body, and snacks are multiplied with the addition of vitamins and mineral salts, such as those made with milk or yogurt. The phenomenon of “gluten-free” is a clear example of the fact that the boundary between scientific certainties and social trends is constantly questioned.

In the essay *Gusto, esperienza, testualità: la pubblicità del cioccolato* (Boero 2019), food is considered as a real language, as a signifying system capable of communicating cultural values and identities; at the same time, the sense of taste naturally refers to the somatic, perceptive, corporeal dimension, but also to the practices of purchasing/consuming food, in which the experiential dimension has an increasing importance. From the analysis of a series of chocolate commercials, it emerges that the recurring elements on which the communication of taste-experience is based on are the pleasure centring; the individuality of the experience, which takes on an intimate and personal connotation; the use of synaesthesia to summon the sense of taste; the predominance of playful enhancement. There is therefore a significant change with respect to the language with which the advertisements of the same brands used to communicate in the past: if a few years ago the use of irony, sketches, family sagas based on good feelings prevailed, now the advertisements stage the sense of taste through different narrations, which combine the search for experience with attention to quality and the production process. Sociosemiotic analysis makes it possible to grasp similar changes, in the background of a more general trend in advertising in the food sector, which increasingly associates the exaltation of polysensory with a return to the “truth” about food, represented more and more often in its practical and constitutive characteristics.

The description of the first thematic area of study introduces the second area of investigation which in recent years has characterised the Italian sociosemiotics of advertising. This is the representation of the family in advertising, from the analysis of emerging models to that of the roles of the various components. Ventura Bordenca, in the aforementioned essay, already stated that it was useful to analyse the role of children in food advertising by considering the set of interactions within the context of the family represented. In 2018, Traini in the essay *The slow pace of change in advertising: new family types in advertisements for people carriers*, analysing a series of commercials in the automotive sector, focuses on the way in which family models are represented by advertising texts. The research shows the prevalence of the traditional, classic family, represented in a compact way around the car. Even when we depart from the classic model, the result is a reassuring representation of family, without a change in the underlying values. From disaggregation we almost always move on to unity: the mem-

bers of the family find themselves together in the house or in the car, just as – metaphorically – the disaggregated pieces of the car come together in a technological compositional unit. Lonely fathers are expected in the house by their wives; single women only temporarily escape from the classic family ménage and, even when families are clearly de-constructed, the basic values of the tradition remain firm: unity, harmony, affection. In another essay, Traini (2020) observed the most recent trends by selecting some commercials of family cars over the period 2015–2019. The findings of his research show that there are other types of more meaningful valorisations of family in advertising, with respect to the particular historical phase, but the representative codes of the traditional family continue to prevail. Advertising changes slowly, with great caution; it does not propose radical innovations, but gradually innovates, always maintaining an anchor with tradition.

In the book *La famiglia della pubblicità. Stereotipi, ruoli, identità* (Boero 2018) these first surveys are taken up and expanded, extending the gaze beyond the automotive sector to analyse the ways in which the family is represented in Italian advertising in the period 2007–2017. Although some texts have begun to show new family models, the predominant representative code is always that of the traditional patriarchal family. This also happens for the representation of the different family members: if the woman struggles to deviate from the classic stereotypical representations that see her mainly as an “Angel at the Hearth”, even in the case of men, children and grandparents, simplified representations are present and divergent with respect to the changes that have taken place in reality. An example is the case of grandparents, always represented as wise and smiling, when in contemporary society the concept of seniority gradually begins to be separated from that of being grandparents. The results of the analysis confirm the hypotheses of Eco (1968), who had spoken of advertising as a “consolatory art” that does not invent new codes but re-elaborates what is already in circulation. Advertising is more a static than an innovative language, a social language that introduces novelty in a very gradual way. It is true that from a sociosemiotic point of view, advertising – as a “mirror” of society (Landowski 1989) – forces society to rethink itself and to change, but it does so extremely slowly, accepting new things with great moderation. If fathers are starting to appear on television alone, as the protagonists of sporadic but encouraging commercials, this happens because something in family relationships is changing and the brands are ready to grasp such a change, to re-propose it in advertising, contributing in part to social change.

Another area of investigation undertaken in recent years is the study of consumption practices within the advertising texts (Boero 2017). Advertising, in fact, proposes through its discourses some consumption models that are constantly evolving. An example is the nostalgic model, at the centre of the advertising discourses of the last twenty years, or, more recently, of the health-conscious or environmentalist model. Advertising proposes values in which the receiver can recognise himself and inscribes specific consumers profiles in its texts. From the sociosemiotic point of view, consumption is

therefore seen as a language, as a system of signification and communication guided by its own logics, whose meanings become a means for understanding cultural processes and changes. Advertising also inscribes consumption practices in its discourses, which refer to a specific way of conceiving the relationship between consumer and objects in the sales spaces. Advertising, from a sociosemiotic point of view, proposes consumption models and at the same time presents itself as a story of those models already present in society. As stated by Polidoro (2020), media texts and other forms of communication typical of our age are often considered as simple or simplified texts, suitable for quick, disposable consumption. Semiotics can help us understand how, behind many consumption texts, there can be a deep stratification of meanings and a solid coherence between levels.

Another topic at the centre of advertising research is the crisis. Recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, advertising becomes a story of society in this particular historical period (Lorusso et al. eds. 2020). As highlighted by Spaziante (2020) in a recent essay on advertising communication at the time of the lockdown, if some brands have strongly focused on the corporate dimension, going back to the sources of their value pact, and enhancing the company identity, others have given greater emphasis on the dimension of consumers, describing their lifestyle habits in times of the lockdown. Some brands have considered it appropriate to eliminate the presence of products from the commercial content, others have chosen to keep it in subliminal forms, others have not worried at all. But beyond the strategy, more or less focused on the corporate dimension, a more general question arises – whether or not it is legitimate to associate commercial content with a social emergency. In a critical article in the *New York Times*, Amanda Hess (2020) confirms that in the commercials of the COVID-19 period the products tended to disappear, but instead a dimension usually hidden in advertising reappeared, namely the production phase of the goods. Many commercials showed cranes, transport, assembly lines, in general, people intent on productive work, who were then labeled as “heroes”, often associated with health workers on the front line in the battle against the virus. Hess recalls that the workers of industry and logistics were not volunteers driven by heroism, but people who did their job in a necessary way, so portraying them as heroes leads to hiding reality, and to placing them in a role that is not always pleasing to them. The legitimacy with which a brand can name a dramatic and emergency existential dimension therefore appears questionable, placing it under the sign of its own commercial banner.

The author concludes by inserting the analyses carried out in the context of a trend that goes beyond the COVID period and which more generally concerns the role of the brand and advertising language in the contemporary world. In the early months of 2020, there has been a rapid and growing awareness in relation to ethical and social issues by the brands’ world. An orientation that has already emerged in the wake of the protests for climate change and the “Fridays for Future” movement promoted by Greta Thunberg starting from the end of 2018, and then continued with the COVID-

19 emergency. In such a context, several organisations seem ready to do anything, even to suspend or strongly reduce their traditional advertising actions, to replace them with as many communication actions, decidedly of greater impact. Perhaps it is in this key that the current trend in advertising must be read: an extraordinary phase that could create an epochal, or at least significant break, accelerating the process of transformation of the role of the advertising language in the contemporary world.

5. Conclusions

At the end of this journey into the Italian sociosemiotics of advertising, we can trace a partial balance of the main elements that emerged.

First of all, as we have highlighted, the sociosemiotics of advertising has been affected by the influence of French sociosemiotics and in particular of Landowski's (1989) studies on semiotics as a "mirror of society". At the same time, it is possible to identify two different in-depth paths that have characterised the Italian research context: on the one hand the dialogue with the field of marketing and business communication, on the other that with the sociology of consumption, disciplines that share with sociosemiotics the interest in some themes, even in the diversity of the approaches and analysis tools used for their study. We then identified some topics around which the sociosemiotic studies of recent years have been directed: from food to the family representations, from consumption models and practices to ethical, environmental, social and crisis communication.

As far as the type of approach is concerned, it should be emphasised how the Italian sociosemiotics of advertising has distinguished – and is increasingly distinguished – itself by an analytical tendency, thus deepening the empirical vocation of sociosemiotics. Indeed, the proposed studies not only represent speculative moments, but are characterised by the use of the analysis of one or more texts with the aim of identifying trends. The reflections reached by sociosemiotics of advertising scholars therefore derive from the results of the analysis of a more or less extensive corpus of texts, representative of specific research fields.

We can therefore say that over the last ten years sociosemiotics in Italy has been characterised by particular attention to the analysis of social texts:⁶ if on the one hand the objective of the most recent studies is to grasp the changing relationship between society and discourses that represent it, at the same time, to carry out this type of survey, a pragmatic approach is spreading in which text-analysis plays a fundamental role.⁷ As we have seen, these studies are connected to the structuralist and generative approach of Greimasian semiotics: hence a series of tools to identify the dominant values, the recurring narrative and discursive structures within the considered texts, with the aim to grasp the representations of the social, the images of everyday life, the changing interactions between society and advertising texts. This analytic tendency does not imply the abandonment of the

philosophical vocation of semiotics but represents a strengthening of the equally important empirical vocation of the discipline. In fact, the analyses are not auto-referential but have the objective of rigorously describing the effect of meaning that derives from the interaction between reality and the discourses that represent it, as well as of grasping the effect of meaning that derives from the interaction among different social discourses.

Precisely by virtue of this interest in analysis, one of the main challenges is to study new forms of advertising, such as social media advertising, which call into question some innovative tools and categories. Sociosemiotics in the coming years will therefore have to deal with a constantly evolving communicative scenario, monitoring the changes in the advertising discourse in the semiosphere.

Notes

- 1 Like the word, the image also has two levels of interpretation: the strictly advertising level of a connotative type, and the visual one of a denotative type, linked to the fact that the image is there as a representation of something else.
- 2 Alongside the purely linguistic message, semiotic research begins to consider the problem of analysing that part of the advertising text that makes use of expressive substances of a visual type. The study of advertising images inaugurates a semiology of visuality.
- 3 A story, according to the semiotic hypothesis, is always the story of a Subject who goes in search of an Object. The latter, however, is not important in itself but for the fact of being desired, for the values that the Subject projects into it.
- 4 In the context of the practical applications of sociosemiotics, Pozzato (2001) identifies two trends: spectacular semiotics and sociosemiotics as a theory of action-manipulation.
- 5 The enhancement of the Object by the Subject is subdivided into four large classes in which the possible forms of rationality consciously adopted by consumers when purchasing certain products are collected: practical, playful, critical and utopian valorisation.
- 6 With this expression we intend to indicate that set of texts able to tell something about the society in which they are produced.
- 7 Rolle (2014) has collected a series of semiotic analyses in his volume *Semiotics in practice*, highlighting how one of the characteristics of semiotics in Italy is precisely the tendency towards analysis.

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