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MANIPULATIVE POWER OF MEDIA IN TODAY'S CONSUMERIST SOCIETIES

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Abstract

In today's postmodern capitalist societies, media has an undeniable role and effect on people's lives with its printed and visual devices. As a result of the consumerist demands of capitalism, media imposes a manipulative power through advertisements and commercials broadcast constantly. Through them, masses are targeted to be persuaded in artificial realities and their lifestyles, ideas as well as their worldviews are shaped, so consumerism is fuelled and the permanence of the capitalist system is guaranteed. Thus, this paper aims to analyze, with the help of examples, how the perception and practice of some familiar figures, ideals, fictional characters or traditional values are twisted and manipulated in field of advertising to make masses believe in artificially constructed realities that serve financial goals.

Keywords: *Capitalism, Consumerism, Media, Advertisements, Commercials, Manipulation.*

GÜNÜMÜZÜN TÜKETİM TOPLUMLARINDA MEDYANIN MANİPÜLATİF GÜCÜ

Özet

Günümüzün postmodern kapitalist toplumlarında, yazılı ve görsel aygıtlarıyla medya insanların hayatlarında yadsınmaz bir role ve etkiye sahiptir. Kapitalizmin tüketime yönelik talepleri sonucunda, medya sürekli yayın halindeki basılı ve görsel reklamları aracılığıyla manipülatif bir güç empoze etmektedir. Reklamlar vasıtasıyla, kitleler yapay gerçekliklere ikna edilmek üzere hedef alınmakta ve yaşam tarzları, fikirleri hatta dünya görüşleri şekillendirilmekte, böylelikle tüketicilik körüklenmekte ve kapitalist sistemin devamlılığı garantilenmektedir. Bu sebeple, bu çalışma bazı tanıdık figürlerin, ideallerin, kurgusal karakterlerin veya geleneksel değerlerin algısı ve uygulanışlarının kitleleri yapay olarak oluşturulmuş, ekonomik hedeflere hizmet eden gerçekliklere inandırmak amacıyla rekalcılık alanında nasıl çarpıtılıp manipüle edildiğini örnekler üzerinden incelemeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kapitalizm, Tüketicilik, Medya, Reklamlar, Manipülasyon.*

Media is certainly a significant part of the lives of today's people whether it is in printed or visual format. Starting with the first moments of each day, everybody is exposed to messages coming out of a newspaper, magazine, internet, radio or most commonly out of television. Considering the widespread availability of media tools and the pressure created by their unceasing voices, it is not excessive to claim that media is the most effective device which shapes the life styles, habits and ideas of societies today.

Media has always played a great role in people's lives. However, with the emergence and pervasion of television, the shaping, directing and controlling aspect of media has reached its peak. Although the power of television with its endless broadcasting does not mean the decline of presswork at all, the availability of it almost everywhere and its attraction compared to presswork have provided it with some advantages. Television's colourful, animate world with full of sounds makes it a favourite for people from all walks of life. Furthermore, the emergence of internet as a worldwide system connecting people has changed the world forever and has become the most influential among its visual counterparts.

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Potential power of media and its discourse has been the subject of the studies of many critics such as Foucault, Althusser and Gramsci. Michel Foucault associates power of discourse with political, economic, ideological and social control and bases his argument on the ideas of Nietzsche who claims that *“people first decide what they want and then fit the facts to their aim”* (Selden, 1997: 185). According to Foucault, discourse has such great significance that *“every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it”* (Foucault, 1972: 227). Like the educational system, for him, media emerges as a control system. Actually, it is a more common way of control since it is never limited within classrooms but spreads out everywhere freely. Media has the capacity to *“constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules”* (Foucault, 1972: 224).

Like Foucault, Louis Althusser focuses on control over people through some ideological apparatuses among which media has a great role. According to Althusser, media imposes the dominant ideology on the society and *“what is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live”* (1971: 242).

Antonio Gramsci agrees with both critics on the control of some forces upon people and supports the concept of *interpellation* suggested by Althusser. For him, the success of the control system lies in the illusion that people feel free while they are making their choices although they are completely directed. This illusion is created by *“popular culture and the mass media [which] are places where hegemony is produced, reproduced and transformed”* (Strinati, 1995: 151).

A postmodern world where reality is created as an illusion by such a powerful source as media is closely related both with capitalism and consumerism. It is a common fact for the postmodern people to live in societies *“in which the mass media and popular culture are the most important and powerful institutions, and control and shape all other types of social relationships”* (Strinati, 1995: 205). In postmodern societies, *“popular cultures signs and media images increasingly dominate [people’s] sense of reality, and the way [they] define [themselves] and the world around [them]”* (Strinati, 1995: 205). If a mirror is used as a metaphor to define the relationship between media and the society, in postmodern world this mirror does not reflect reality anymore but its reflections are accepted as reality instead. The metaphor is best suitable for television indeed since today it is a one-sided mirror reflecting its own reality upon people and makes them believe it. Although the world around people is much more different than the one on the screen, they are so much under the spell that they can not see the real reality. They are unaware of the fact that, for the consumerist ends of the capitalist world, all kinds of *reality* whether it is real or made-up artificially is welcome as long as it adds to the capital.

Advertisements and commercials are an inevitable part of media. Commercials on television are gripping both for adults and children no matter if they define them nuisance or entertainment. Advertisements on printed media are funny, interesting or cleverly designed and they are really following us with smart advertising systems on internet. Obviously, media has the power to manipulate people and affect their choices. Thus, it is an essential part of their sales strategy for all brands to create a reality of their own and make people believe in it. In this brand-new capitalist and postmodern world, for the sake of ambition for more money, there is no value, including historical, political or cultural ones, which cannot be used as a means of marketing. While doing this, they act in a way summarized by Roland Barthes as *“[transforming] history into nature”* (1991: 128). Michael Gardiner explains this process of *“transforming history and culture into nature” as creating “an extremely powerful ‘reality effect’ on the social world, [which] is directly imposed on the ‘masses’”* (1992: 145-148). By focusing on this transformation process, media creates an artificial reality which is in the service of fuelling consumerist societies. Thus, this paper aims to analyze, with the help of examples, how the perception and practice of some familiar figures, ideals, fictional characters or traditional values are twisted and manipulated in field of advertising to serve financial goals.

As put forward by Peter Barry, *“within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses: everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth; this is the hyperreal”* (2002: 89). In other words, there is no reality anymore; *“it is a world of simulations rather than representations”* (Hassan, 1987: 228). And the world of simulations is the thing that feeds both capitalism and consumerism today:

“throughout its history it was capital that first fed on the deconstruction of every referential, of every human objective, that shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power.” (Baudrillard, 1994: 17)

However, the system’s triumph lies in its imposition without startling people. In this respect, Dominic Strinati emphasizes an important aspect of postmodernism which is “a stress on ... playfulness” (1995: 210). Playfulness sometimes reaches to such extent that it sticks a false identity on some familiar characters to convince people to some false ideas.

Cigarette advertisements from the Christmas periods of 1950s and 60s seem to be extremely successful in this respect (Figure 1, 2 and 3).



Figure 1:Pall Mall Santa Claus Christmas Advertisement
Source: http://tobacco.stanford.edu/tobacco_main/index.php (14.11.2016)



Figure 2: Lucky Strike Santa Claus Christmas Advertisement
Source: surlalunefairytales.blogspot.com (16.11.2016)



Figure 3: Camel Santa Claus Christmas Advertisement

Source: http://tobacco.stanford.edu/tobacco_main/index.php (14.11.2016)

Instead of Santa Claus, a cultural figure who is very much fond of making children happy with his presents, in all three advertisements the kind, fatherly image is transferred for another purpose which is to persuade customers to give some cigarettes to their friends this Christmas. The well-known green and red figure of Santa with his red, fat, healthy cheeks make people believe that cigarettes are mild, perfectly packed for this special time of the year and they are the best possible choice as a gift. The image of Santa has so much positivity that it is hard to think about the close relation between smoking and cancer while looking at these advertisements.

Political ideals are at the service of capitalism as well. In the postmodern world, where metanarratives “*such as religion, science, art, modernism and Marxism which make absolute, universal and all-embracing claims to knowledge and truth*” (Strinati, 1995: 209) are all in decline, it is not absurd for the political figures to serve a purpose that goes beyond their own. As in the example of Figure 4, Che, a heroic and political figure, who has become the symbol of rebellion and freedom, gives his name to a men’s magazine whose catch phrase is ‘let us keep on dreaming of a better world’.



Figure 4:Ché Magazine Advertisement

Source: <http://www.frederiksamuel.com/blog/2007/09/che-mens-magazine.html> (14.11.2016)

Unlike advertisements that “used to tell us how valuable and useful a product was” (Strinati, 1995: 214), in this magazine advertisement, the message is given by using a distortion of the ideals of a political figure. It is also striking to see how the world has changed even to the degree that the ideals of millions once used to be, *a better world* today is only reduced to sexual perception and consumption of the female body.

Children constitute a large group which is continuously on target to be persuaded by a sheer number of companies. Characters from the world of fairy tales become favourite at this stage for children who are highly familiar and even identify themselves with them. However, the well-known fates of characters such as The Three Little Pigs or Little Red Riding Hood are presented in totally different ways in the following examples which belong to Burger King, a fast food company, one of the many whose greatest potential customers are not surprisingly children (Figure 5 and 6).



Figure 5: Burger King-Three Little Pigs Themed Advertisement
Source: surlalunefairytales.blogspot.com (16.11.2016)



Figure 6: Burger King-The Little Red Riding Hood Themed Advertisement
Source: surlalunefairytales.blogspot.com (16.11.2016)

The most striking point of both advertisements is that they turn the original story upside down and create new ones as indicated by the catch phrase 'it's another story'. In these versions, the wolf becomes a friend of his former enemies: ironically appropriate for the world we live in. However, there is an ambiguity about the changing roles; which side is good and which is bad is a confusing matter just like it is in our lives shaped by chaos and conflict. After all, the message here does not focus on any moral point in contrast to the original message of the fairy tale. Here, the emphasis is on Burger King as a common meeting point for all people no matter who they are.

In all of these cigarette, magazine and fast food advertisements, the characters or the concepts employed are known worldwide and internalized by large groups of people. Assuming them as *real*, the cultural value of Santa Claus, the political significance of Che and his worldview or the fictional and moral basis of fairy tale characters, their distortion by media gives them the status of *hyperreal* in Jean Baudrillard's words:

"The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control - and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere." (1994: 3)

For Baudrillard, the contraction between the two worlds of reality and hyperreality reaches to such extent that it is no longer possible to distinguish one from the other. This overlapping leads to a kind of simultaneity, in which the past, present and future intersects. At the final stage, reality even disappears totally and leaves the stage to a hyperreality possible to be shaped in any desired way, which guarantees the consumerist deception in our case. Therefore, breaks, fragments, repetitions and confusion about time come into question. In the following television commercials of global companies, which have been broadcast in Turkish televisions in recent years, the use of such postmodern elements that support the alienation and loss of reality become prominent with their power to convince customers.

The first commercial belongs to Burger King and it was broadcast during Ramadan, the month of fasting in Turkey. It is about a special menu for Turkish people for this special period; Sultan Menu (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Burger King-Sultan Menu

Source: www.ulker.com.tr (18.11.2016)

Sultan Menu is just one of many examples which follow the motto of *thinking globally and acting locally*. Classical Burger King menus are transformed into local tastes which are associated with the religious character of Ramadan and the traditional but animated image of a Sultan. In Figure 7, traditional Turkish drink; *ayran* replaces coke. In addition to *ayran*, the menu includes some soup and dessert which are parts of the traditional Ramadan menu as well. The television version of the commercial has *saray sarma*, tea and dates all of which are special food related with a dinner called *iftar* in Ramadan.



Figure 8: Burger King-Crescent Moon image in a Ramadan advertisement

Source: <https://cultureness.wordpress.com> (18.11.2016)

The crescent moon image in the advertisement in Figure 8 creates the alienation effect together with all food that belongs to Turkish culture but commercialized by a global company. The Ottoman Sultan is nothing but a commercial image in the postmodern world. The funny details about the air-conditioning or radio in the commercial add to the absurdism of Sultan by pulling him out of the reality he belongs to and creating a *hyperreal* image instead. Likewise, coke commercials, especially during Ramadan, emphasize a hyperreality which pretends as if coke is an essential traditional drink consumed by every member of the family at dinner time. In a Coca-Cola commercial, which was broadcast on Turkish channels during Ramadan in 2009, the family even drinks coke when they get up to eat at night. Considering the acidic content of this drink, it is highly absurd to think of it as an indispensable part of a meal traditionally consumed at nighttime as it is also absurd to think of coke first at dinner after fasting all day.

A similar example is a pop corn commercial. Like the Ottoman Sultan, Egyptian pharaoh, whose men discover pop corn accidentally, enjoys its taste. Again, the Egyptian pharaoh is pictured like a caricature that is very fond of this discovery. The language in the commercial creates the alienation effect and the difference between what is said and the translation in the subtitles add to the feeling of unreality. Finally, the pharaoh becomes "*The King of Corn*"; a pun focused on the homophony between the words *corn* and *Egypt* in Turkish. The puns and mistranslations including "*Hü-mey-ra*" as "*For the sake of great God Ra!*" or the meaning of the word pop corn translated as "*how delicious*" (<https://www.vividodo.com>) support the unreal atmosphere of the commercial.

Finally, Denizbank has a series of commercials based on the adventures of fictional characters; Robinson and Man Friday. Like the examples discussed so far, Robinson and Man Friday appear in a context far from their original. First of all, although they live on a desert island with no bank they advertise a bank, its cards and credits, which constitute a highly ironical atmosphere (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Denizbank commercial-Robinson and Man Friday

Source: <http://suigenuris.wordpress.com> (16.11.2016)

In one of the first episodes of the series, Robinson is alone on the island and very much bored. He is writing on his diary and complaining at the same time: “*on this island everyday is the same!*” (<http://www.vidivodo.com/263887/robinson-ve-cuma-denizbank>). When he finds nothing more to write, he decides to read and surprisingly the book he has is Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe. Robinson himself reading his own story and its self-referentiality creates absurdity. Moreover, Man Friday comes out of the sea while Robinson is just reading a part about his arrival.

The clash of the familiar text and its distorted commercial version destroys the unity. Unlike the original Robinson Crusoe story, which had unity in itself supported by “*parallels, echoes and reflections*” (Barry, 2002: 72), this commercial has “*gaps, breaks, fissures and discontinuities of all kinds*” (Barry, 2002: 72). Even the story of Robinson and Friday narrated through a series proves the fragmentation of the original story. Moreover, none of the episodes follows from where the previous one stopped, but each narrates a new story. Thus, “*the text is at war with itself: it is a house divided, and disunified*” (Barry, 2002: 72).

Absurdities continue in the following episodes. For instance, in one episode of the series Man Friday meets his aunt Akuna Matata in the forest who is about to cook Robinson in a cauldron together with other native people (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Denizbank commercial- Cannibalism vs. A Credit Card

Source: <http://www.turizmtatilseyahat.com> (26.05.2010)

Man Friday reacts to the people around the cauldron by asking if there is still cannibalism in this century in a surprised manner as if his being a -white- member of the tribe is not shocking at all. However, what makes the tribe members let Robinson free is not this reaction but it is Man Friday and Robinson’s daughter Deniz who offers them a credit card (www.dailymotion.com). It is an ironical emphasis on a credit card replaced for food especially on a desert island while there is nothing to buy. But for capitalism there is no place left where people are not interested in shopping and the idea of *earn while you are shopping*.

The examples so far prove that magazines and newspapers mean more than printed words. John Storey claims that printed media’s “*popularity is unthinkable without taking into account the photographs, the illustrations and the visual advertisements which appear on almost every page*” (2003: 103). Television and internet have more but not less of course. As stated, they are even more powerful than press work with their qualities such as action and music. Obviously, the examples prove that the world of advertisements and commercials constitutes a link of vital importance between the producers and the consumers. As a result of the consumerist perspective of the capitalist societies, the main purpose of all brands is to make people buy any product whatever it takes. In order to persuade the consumers, it is certainly a secure way to use some familiar figures or ideas because they guarantee a feeling of sympathy to a great degree between the consumer and the brand or the product. The familiar figures and ideas even do not have to be represented in their originality. That is, they are still and even more effective when they are twisted and manipulated for the financial advantage of companies.

This manipulation is somehow inevitable since advertisement industry in all kinds of media depends on one strong principle especially in the postmodern age: not directly selling the product but selling a myth, a dream or an ideal fantasy together with it which is the real reason for many customers to buy that product.

“The centrality of the commercial manipulation of images through advertising the media and the displays, performances and spectacles of the urbanized fabric of daily life therefore entails a constant reworking of desires through images. Hence the consumer society must not be regarded as only releasing a dominant materialism for it also confronts people with dream-images which speak to desires, and aestheticize and derealize reality.” (qtd. in Featherstone, 2007: 66)

Advertising world achieves this derealization through creating a hyperreality in itself as discussed in this paper. Barthes defines this shift in the meaning as a new relation between the signifier and the signified. Thus, new meanings are created, as suggested by Derrida, by setting new bounds in a web-like structure. As a result, consumers come across with advertisements that offer an attractive myth which aims to make them believe in an alternative story; as if these products are a natural part of their lives and traditions or as if they have a function beyond their real usage and quality. *“The stylish look of advertisements, their clever quotations from popular culture and art, their mini sagas, their concern with the surfaces of things, their jokey quips at the expense of advertising itself, their self-conscious revelation of the nature of advertisements as media constructions, and their blatant recycling of the past”* (Strinati, 1995: 215) are all signs of the postmodern hyperreal touch in media today.

Thanks to this postmodern hyperreality surrounding the masses through media, people feel the comfort of familiarity while serving for the financial ends of the system. Namely, feeling better while smoking the cigarettes offered by Santa, eating fast food preferred even in the world of fairy tales or believing that a drink or a specific food is an essential part of a special time of the year, people do not feel any necessity to question more. Instead, masses are happy just to consume these myths offered to them together with the products in addition to a feeling of freedom as suggested by Althusser. They feel free and natural in their choices because the process of naturalization according to Barthes’ theory is completed. That is, people accept the artificial relations between the product and the myths constructed around them as natural. Then, no one is curious about the strange relation between a credit card and an exotic island, but a commercial including Robinson and Friday is recollective almost for everyone.

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