7th International Conference on Intercultural Education "Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World", EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

The audiovisual representation of poverty in the advertising of the NGDO Manos Unidas

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Abstract

Every day, the communication media offer portrayals of the so-called Third World and developing countries. These areas of the world, being more or less far geographically, are conceived through a mediation and representation process, be it with informative or advertising purposes, with a large emphasis on the value of audiovisual and digital media to generate empathy through emotions. This study offers the most noteworthy results of a research effort focused on the audiovisual advertising of the Spanish Non-Governmental Development Organization (NGDO) Manos Unidas, analyzing its advertising campaigns since 1995, when their first advertisement was released, until 2015. Using a content analysis approach and the application of the audiovisual narrative analytical paradigm, this diachronic study explains concrete aspects regarding the representation of poverty in 30 advertising pieces, where we can highlight the feeling of hope in human kind, the use of images to represent real-life stories or testimonies and the permanent suggestion of transformative action and the encouragement of empathy and the values of commitment and solidarity. In this case, advertising is a genre that allows us to understand how poverty is represented in the media.

Keywords: Poverty; Solidarity; NGO; Content Analysis; Audiovisual Narrative; Manos Unidas.

1. Introduction and current state of affairs

In the 21st century, poverty is still a harsh reality in many areas of the world. It is a situation that must not merely be regarded as a lack of resources, because it is related to conflict, discrimination, repression and violations of human dignity. A recent report published by the NGO Amnesty International in 2016 dedicates 500 pages to describing this

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scourge. The current situation requires public and private intervention in order to alleviate the variety of hardships suffered in some areas of the world that are at such a great disadvantage:

> *It is widely accepted that poverty limits the daily material conditions available but, at the same time, from a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon, it is accepted and it is a widely shared view that the emotional, social, relational, educational and health repercussions of this phenomenon are equally or more important than the former, in the sense that they can contribute towards worsening, consolidating and perpetuating situations of disadvantage, especially when the poverty is extreme and persistent* (Alonso Trallero, 2016, p.114).

In spite of the awareness on issues of inequality, the population in developed countries seems to become truly aware of the veracity of the situation through visual and audiovisual representations. The fact of showing a reality visually makes it more credible. In this sense, television and digital screens have become a window to a landscape of inequality, but also providing opportunities to foster commitment and selfless action.

We need to see to believe in order to act or commit ourselves. Non-Governmental Development Organizations (NGDOs) are aware of the need to show the harsh reality of the so-called Third World through audiovisual representation in a context of withering public budgets for international cooperation. In Spain, the second decade of the twenty-first century began with a clear reduction in public benefits for international solidarity. In 2012, for example, these aids had reduced to the levels of 1981 (Agudo, 2012). According to the Coordinating body of NGOs for Development in Spain, the allocation of public funds for international cooperation and humanitarian assistance diminished by 40% between 2012 and 2015 (CONGD, 2015), indicating a clear dependency of the sector on the economic evolution of developed countries. In other words, the viability of the fight against poverty on behalf of these organizations depends on their possibilities to raise funds.

Various specialized reports (Fundación Lealtad, 2015) have prioritized the need to strengthen and increase private funding through private donations from citizens and corporations, with the aim of reducing the dependence on public funds which have accounted for as much as 70 % of the sector's budget (Fundación PwC, ESADE and Obra Social La Caixa, 2014, p.7).

In this context, a further specialization of humanitarian organizations of the non-profit sector is vital, as they have seen their workforce curtailed, while at the same time they have made their communication more efficient on the basis of education, ethics and excellence (González Álvarez, 2012). In this line of work, the dissemination of activities and the promotion of these institutions remains paramount, and the audiovisual and digital media are deemed the best-equipped to reach citizens efficiently.

This study aims to observe how the South is represented from the perspective of NGOs working in international cooperation, as they raise funds in the most developed countries to fight poverty in areas that suffer from this scourge. Supposedly, fieldwork helps empathy take precedence in these dissemination processes when facing the cultural inertia described by Edward Said, and which is marked by the strength and colonial domination of the relations between North and South (2002, p.68), in a post-colonial era where the "power of narrative" is still a determining factor (Said, 2001, p.13).

With this aim, the study addresses the audiovisual advertising of Manos Unidas, a Spanish NGDO working in international cooperation. The study focuses on audiovisual narrative and representation, but can be considered part of a larger framework, of Communication for Social Change (Chaves Gil, 2012), with a large influence of interactivity on society 2.0 and the new approach that is given by the representation process of the prosumer (Toffler, 1980) and active perception, with the possibilities offered in this new context for the participation and strengthening of the community (Gumucio Dragón, 2012, p.41).

Ultimately, the study comprises the analysis of a specific case within a wider context of interactivity. What distinguishes this research study is that it does not focus on the representation of information, but on the vision that is offered to us of the Third World in humanitarian advertising and, specifically, in the creation of audiovisual contents, in line with the different studies carried out over the last few years – especially the analysis of the YouTube channels of these organizations (Arroyo Almaraz, Baños &Van-Wyck, 2013; Martínez-Rodrigo & Marfil-Carmona, 2013) and the audiovisual representation of solidarity (Marfil-Carmona, 2014; Nos Aldás, 2007). The reality of our concept of poverty is constructed, largely, through its representation on screens.

2. Objectives

The study holds its main focus on discovering the narrative strategies employed in the audiovisual advertising productions of the Spanish NGDO Manos Unidas, with a special emphasis on the representation of poverty in this footage. Furthermore, the following specific objectives have been pursued:

- To identify the key elements in the representation of solidarity and international cooperation within the selected sample, assessing the application possibilities of these conclusions to a wider context of NGDOs and the non-profit sector.
- To explain the relationship between these representation mechanisms of poverty, explaining the values associated with the advertising campaigns launched by Manos Unidas.

3. Material and Methodology

3.1. Methodological framework

The study follows a deductive basis, contrasting theoretical concepts with the selected sample and subsequently linking this conceptual basis with the "demands of practice" (Popper, 1962, p.32). In this way, this article provides the results of a qualitative and quantitative research effort that focuses, within the framework of content analysis Bardin, 1986; Krippendorff, 1990), on the study of the communication media and audiovisual representation, with special emphasis on the critical analysis of image from a multidisciplinary perspective, on the basis of Picture Theory (Aparici & García Matilla, 2008; Barthes, 1980; Mitchell, 2009; Vilches, 2002; Villafañe & Mínguez, 1996) and the analysis of representation from a critical perspective (Aparici, 2010; Baudrillard, 2005; Mattelart, A. & Mattelart, M., 2000).

This theoretical framework, which focuses on interpreting representation, is applied through the analytical paradigm of audiovisual narrative (Bordwell, 1995 and 1996; García García, 2006; García García & Rajas, 2011; García Jiménez, 1993; Ricoeur, 1996; Sánchez-Navarro, 2006), a model based on the application of some of the foundations of narrative analysis to films and audiovisual productions (Propp, 2001; Genette, 1989; Greimas, 1991) from a textual perspective (Aumont & Marie, 1990; Casetti & di Chio, 1991; Van Dijk, 1992; Zunzunegui, 2007). The main framework for the analysis, therefore, is substantiated on the selection of the most relevant elements of the story and discourse (Chatman, 1990).

These methodological foundations set a basis for qualitative interpretation which is finally expressed quantitatively through different charts aimed at explaining the narrative strategies used in the advertising of Manos Unidas and the most noteworthy elements representing poverty.

3.2. Empirical context and sample

Manos Unidas is the Spanish Catholic Church organization for the aid, promotion and development of the Third World and, at the same time, a Non-Governmental Development Organization (NGDO) integrated by both catholic and secular volunteers, according to the definition given in the organization's web page[2]. With a budget over 43 million euros, according to data from 2014 (Manos Unidas, 2015, p.7), the main aim of the organization is to maintain and increase private contributions.

The main advertisements from each of the organization's advertising campaigns since 1995, the year in which the first television campaign of the organization was launched, have been analyzed. In those cases where there were two advertisements with differing length in one year, priority was given to the piece with a standard duration of 30 seconds. These make up 30 advertisements, all of them available on the NGDO's official YouTube channel. Once the narrative duplicates were removed, 22 audiovisual pieces with an average duration of 29.1 seconds were selected for the sample to be analyzed.

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[2] Informational available on: http://www.manosunidas.org/quienes-somos (Retrieved on: 27/02/2016).

4. Analysis and results

This study offers a comprehensive view of all the audiovisual advertising of Manos Unidas, which can be considered to employ a strategy based on real stories or testimonies and the veracity of images despite being advertising messages. Thus, 82 % of the analyzed audiovisual documents, that is, a total of 18 advertisements, excluding 4 from the total, are the result of registering or recording in the very areas where Manos Unidas acts. In this way, it can be said that the NGDO's advertising is focused on offering the highest degree of exactitude and realism when portraying their activities, even when the purpose of these productions is promotional. In this way, the use of created images, such as virtual reality, mock-ups, infographics, etc., as raw footage or, in the words of Louis Hjelmslev, as the substance expression (1971, p.79), is more reduced. Interestingly, the use of video and photographic image has equal importance in the history of this NGDO's audiovisual advertising, which is also an unequivocal sign of the predominance of real life stories in their communications. Stories from the affected people have traditionally been associated with the photographic medium, and it provides a layer of social documentary to the advertising productions analyzed in this study (Freund, 2001, p.8).

The concept of testimony, conceived as true stories from the people affected, is further reinforced by the use of outdoor locations, which contextualize the activities carried out by Manos Unidas. Following the terminology proposed by Fernández Díez and Martínez Abadía, we can see an element of disposition and selection rather than design and creation of images (2000, p.77).

The meaning of these campaigns, both denotatively and through a more in-depth connotative analysis, can be considered to be quite clear regarding its ability to express univocal meaning. In most cases, the campaigns reach for a balance between the narration of problems and the harsh situations suffered in the NGDO's working locations and a positive and hopeful view instilled by the concept of a hopeful future, linked, obviously, to the work of Manos Unidas and its plead to the audience to collaborate with the organization.

The representation of poverty is especially linked to the narrative meaning of diegetic elements in each audiovisual narration. Specifically, it highlights the kind of person, the represented setting or landscape and the actions that are carried out in that environment. For instance, it is quite easy to recognize the African continent in 40 % of the analyzed advertising pieces, while 27 % show Latin America and 24 % represent Asia. To reinforce the use of real stories or testimonies and veracity as established in the hypothesis of this study, these percentages match the real involvement of Manos Unidas in each continent, with their involvement in Africa being slightly higher – 45 % (Manos Unidas, 2015, p.11).

Some specific cases in the sample set the action in unspecified places, interiors with an abstract or universal meaning, which additionally show the North-South development contrast through irony. Other urban spaces, such as the suburbs of large cities, portray poverty as the frame of action, and, in many cases, as a setting for a hopeful story. However, almost half of the advertisements are set in rural environments, in which farming work and the interior of schools in small settlements are shown.

A key aspect, from a formal point of view, is the value of what happens off-camera in the advertisements, as all of them offer a fragmented view that suggests a universe of human suffering and poverty, showing glimpses of this while avoiding discordance in order to prevent audience rejection. This narrative system based on partially showing reality is commonly seen in audiovisual language.

The actions carried out in the advertisements of the sample are connected to health in 14 cases, followed by education as a basic action on 11 occasions, agrarian work in 9 of the pieces, as well as passive actions that set the scene. Therefore, there is a positive tone in the representation of poverty while clearly portraying the negative value of the setting, especially in the case of the suburbs of large cities.

The human element is, nevertheless, used to connect the actions of the NGDO with the struggle to improve, with the desire to prevail. There is a tendency to show people who look at the camera and address the audience through gestures and smiles and that, above all, express the essence of the content through natural body language. However, the appearance of real people is not based on a narration done by themselves, but on the recording of their actions from outside, sometimes with a documentary-like feel. In all the analyzed characters, crying is minimal and in many cases they show neutral expressions, smiles or expressions of surprise or fear (Figure 1).

17 advertisements out of the 22 that have been analyzed represent apparent situations of poverty in the advertising productions of Manos Unidas since 1995, a significant number that leaves no doubt about the predominance of poverty

in the advertising contents of this NGDO. Furthermore, we must consider that other settings and environments that reflect welfare, such as TV studio sets or the public transport of Spanish cities, are used to represent the contrast between North and South, in this way showing elements that are not available in other parts of the world. However, it is important to emphasize the decrease in the number of advertisements that show cases of extreme hunger (7 advertisements, 31 % of the sample) or war (5 out of 22 advertisements, almost a 23 % of the sample). Therefore, there is a realistic, but restricted, representation of human suffering.
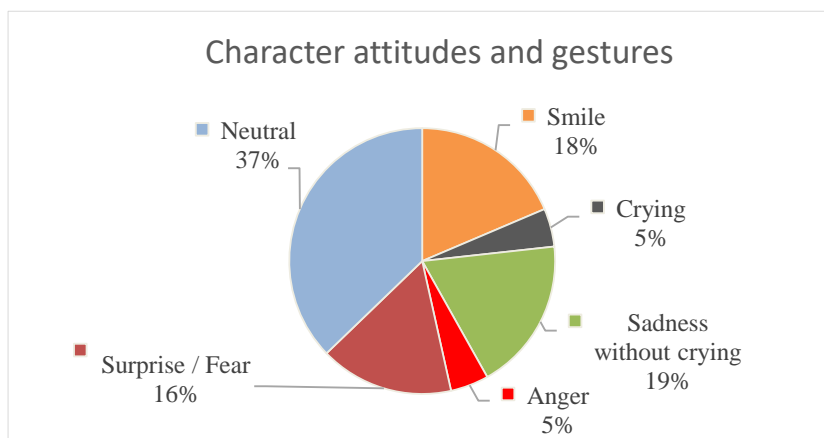

Fig. 1. *Character expressions*. Source: original work.

4. Discussion and conclusion

There are many ways of addressing a sample that, except for two pieces from the same campaign, practically coincides with the statistical population. Therefore, the advertising content from the official campaigns launched by Manos Unidas allows us to carry out an in-depth analysis of its narrative elements. However, another matter is the applicability of the results to the sector. This application of conclusions must be done with some reservations, in spite of the fact that Manos Unidas shares many similarities with other NGOs of this kind in Spain, being one of the most important for the magnitude of its turnover and activities. In other words, Manos Unidas represents Spanish NGDOs.

Having pointed this out, the main conclusion that can be drawn from the study is the value of real life stories and veracity as a common element in the advertising carried out by Manos Unidas throughout its history. Advertising, in spite of being a promotional and persuasive genre, is generally used by NGDOs and Manos Unidas especially by portraying the reality that is experienced in the areas of the world where they carry out their activities.

However, Manos Unidas does not favor dramatic or emotionally shocking advertising in a negative sense, but focuses on providing real, credible settings, characters and actions, touching upon human suffering in favor of displaying extreme situations. Additionally, this NGDO does this by offering the solution in parallel to the narrative or as the narrative close, always following up with a message of hope and, logically, with a plead for the audience's collaboration.

In this analysis, no signs pointing to a cultural distance between North and South have been detected, as the stories are based on empathy, though more focus could have been placed on the beneficiaries of the aid, who are portrayed from the outside, while facing the camera.

The represented scenarios, mostly rural and associated with poverty, establish a link between the city and social marginalization, also connecting the metropolis with commerce and economic prosperity, while the positive tone of these advertisements usually situates the action in health or education-related environments. The portrayal of the so-called "first world" city is used for criticism or denunciation, showing the prosperity that is lacking in other parts of the world.

To conclude, the narrative discourse is positive and transformative and, without avoiding the suffering, portrays the problems that need solving while offering an optimistic outlook towards the future. This working basis, a model

of told narrative, can generate future studies in application to other NGOs and in connection with educational values. The influence of interactive media on the approach used for the audiovisual representation of humanitarian action could be analyzed in a larger sample size. Ever since 1995, Manos Unidas has conveyed a message of hope in its mission to build a better world.

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