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THE PARADOXICAL EMPOWERMENT OF CONSUMER-CITIZENS THROUGH ADVERTISING

Abstract

As the use of new media and the new uses of traditional media evolve in the contemporary everyday life, appeals to consumer participation in advertising appear to have seized the communication process of brands and organisations, thus evoking an empowering trend and suggesting, at least at the discourse level, a transfer of power from corporations to consumers and citizens.

This paper discusses the concept of empowerment through the participations of consumer-citizens in and through advertising, reflects critically on the nature, meaning and impact of this empowerment, arguing that it involves paradoxical processes and results and concludes by suggesting media literacy approaches to promote communicational power balance and sustainability.

Keywords: Empowerment, participation, advertising, citizenship

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary media ecology, powered by both technological innovation and new uses of media, invites and promotes consumer participation in advertising to unprecedented levels. Consumer's participation in advertising contests or as witnesses of a product's efficiency, through personal testimony, for example, is not a novelty in the advertising *modus operandi*. These strategic subterfuges have been used traditionally to convey credibility and involvement to advertising messages. Nevertheless, in the new media landscape, consumers and citizens are urged to take part not only as audience and target of the advertising communicational scheme, but also as producers of the messages, featuring in commercials, but also creating, directing and broadcasting them, often through viral

replication. This prospect of interactivity and pro-activity in the advertising communicational flow would suggest an effective empowerment of the consumer-citizen, being now able to make its own voice heard in the corporation owned media space or in the institutional public space, a stakeholder by its own right and relevance. In order to fully understand the nature and impact of this empowerment we need to observe the interactional performance of consumer and advertising protagonists and plunge deeper into the concept of empowerment itself.

Empowerment: the power of a concept

According to the British Dictionary, the noun "empowerment" stands for "the giving or delegation of power or authority; authorization; the giving of an ability; enablement or permission" meaning, as a transitive verb, "to give or delegate power or authority to; authorize; to give ability to; enable or permit"[1].

The word "empowerment" literally holds the concept of "power" at its core. Depending on the context, it indicates more specific meanings and involves generally different dimensions, namely, 1) transformation; 2) promotion; 3) capacitation and 4) self-awareness. The concept of empowerment involves the notion of transformation, assuming a degree of improvement, a change from one state to another, from one state of difficulty or impotence into a state of empowerment and possibility. Empowerment implies also the promotion of change, that is, the creation of favourable conditions for this change to occur. Empowerment means capacitation, by educational and technical upgrading, and a self-knowledge and awareness of that condition, by being able, being motivated to use the power provided by that capacitation and put it into action. Therefore the multiple meanings of the word produced extensive interpretations.

On one hand, the term empowerment encompasses a broader concept, associated with the grant or acquisition of power capacity associated with the promotion of influence and conditions to act, and in this sense is frequently used in the politics of development rationale, thus involving relevant economic and social dimensions. From a political point of view, for example, it refers to the improvement of the democratic condition:

> (...) empowerment through the deepening of democracy
> by expansion of political culture and citizen participation.

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[1] http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/empowerment, accessed in February 2015.

> Empower here means conquest of time and voice, for individuals, organizations and communities, so that these have high levels of information, autonomy and ability to make their own cultural, political and economic choices. (Horochovski & Meirelles, 2007, p. 494)[2]

The influential dimension of empowerment relates to yet another meaning. In addition to giving authority or providing conditions, empowerment also refers to promote the affirmation or influence of individuals or social groups. In fact, empowerment is read as a process that develops the various levels of participation in the deliberation and decision-making — personal involvement, organisational development or community changes — through which a person or community "gives or gets power from another since power originates outside the person or community who gives or gets it from another" (Iqbal, 2007, p. 60). Empowerment is a phenomenon of transfer and reconfiguration of the balance of power and social influence

> (...) the long process of transferring economic and social power from one to another and/or the creation of new centers of socio-economic power complementary to, or in competition with the traditional centers (...) shifting the balance of social power from one social class or group of classes to another, which may include the shift in economic or political importance between areas or regions, resulting in a new power configuration. (Iqbal, 2007, p. 61)

Another expression associated with empowerment is 'agency' referring to the ability, the capacity and the motivation to act, the actual capacity to produce action and thus change: "(...) the physical or mental ability, skill or capability that enables actors to do something. The actor is assumed to proceed under his or her own volition, or at least without the permission of another" (Arnould, 2007, p. 97). The agency notion is particularly relevant in situation of extreme conditions where a need to act is imposing. Some authors, like Jardine and Dridger (2013), debate the role of risk communication as an opportunity for empowerment in the sense that it should provide conditions for citizens to make informed decisions in face of danger or the perception of risk.

On the other hand, from an educational perspective, the term 'empowerment' is widely accepted as corresponding to the notion of training, indicating a transformation capacity by learning and upgrading

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[2] Author's translation from the Portuguese original text.

information and knowledge. Nevertheless, according to certain currents of education and philosophy, namely Paulo Freire's[3] coinage of the term "empowerment", this transformation is not merely activated from the outside, but must correspond to an inner conquest of power, thus involving a dimension of self-awareness and self-fulfilment (Valoura, 2006, n/p). Furthermore is relevant to underline that the connection between empowerment and self-awareness is not strictly interior to the individual, it also relates to the awareness of himself and of his power and place in society, as a citizen, as part of a community, frequently triggered by the identification of injustices or inequalities, that is, the manifestation of an imbalance of power either inside an organisation, at work, for example, or in the society at large and concurrently in the media sphere.

At the extent to which empowerment specifically relates with the interaction between consumer and advertising, although there is a general understanding of the expression, consumer empowerment is frequently used but not consistently defined. Nevertheless some efforts to enlighten the concept have been made. Shibly et al. (2015) consider three main dimensions: psychological, the individual ability or its perception to produced desired changes, in the sense of becoming able or being allowed to produce those changes or have more control over their environment; economic, concerning namely the consumer buying power, referred by marketing gurus (Porter, 1980) as "consumer bargaining power", the ability to force prices down, highlight quality, improve services or the management view of empowering employees to produce costumer satisfaction; and the social dimension, assuming that there is an inter relational dependency between individual and groups in order to satisfy their mutual needs, "The power of an actor is a function of the other person's dependence on the actor. The greater the other person's dependence on the actor, the greater the actor power in the relationship (...)" (Shibly, 2015, p. 209). The latter perspective seems to illustrate the paradigm shift, reflecting the power imbalance and change, and the correspondent resistance forces towards that change.

THE DOUBLE COMPLICITY OF EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Empowerment thus represents the organized effort of disadvantaged groups to increase control over the resources and the institutional setting

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[3] Paulo Freire is a Brazilian philosopher and educator from the 60's, pioneer in literacy programs in the northeast of Brazil, author of 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970), whose works associate education and development philosophy.

(Abbot, 1995), a sustained process whereby, through collective action and reflection, a community gains a greater understanding of its situation of powerlessness, while acquires confidence and assumes responsibility for its own development and resource management. According to this understanding, true empowerment is enabled by participation, the massive participation of the bases of an organisation as the core ingredient, "the key to articulating the aspirations and mobilizing people's energies. Participation services a mechanism for mobilizing resources, labour, ideas, and motivation for promoting community welfare and development" (Iqbal, 2007, p. 59).

The association between empowerment and participation appears to be particularly relevant with regard to a qualification for participation *de facto* involving, in addition to the creation of technical, legal or social requisites to the empowerment, the ability to provide conditions for motivation and gratification for participation that make this participation compelling, relevant and useful, that is, effective. Referring to the empowerment processes inherent to the implementation of social programs and reforms, Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson (1997) stress the distance between technical training and real participation:

> The process of designing and implementing a policy of fair workfare cannot presuppose that welfare recipients are politically empowered. (...) Citizens who are poor participate in politics far less frequently than more affluent citizens. They also have fewer informal means of influencing public officials (...) poor don't vote and they don't fight back. (Gutmann & Thompson, 1997, pp. 303-305)

Participation and empowerment coexist, in fact, in a double complicity: being participation a form of empowerment and acting also as an empowering force, in order to gain voice and conquer a space of power, decision-making and qualification, through which the exercise of that power becomes effective.

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN ADVERTISING AND CONSUMER-CITIZENS

The advertising communicational process assumes an interaction with consumers as its main target and it involves a multitude of spheres and variables reaching form hard-core commercial strategies to product design, distribution layout, institutional communication and cultural behaviour and attitude environment. A significant number of these dimensions, if not all, have been affected in recent years with a paradigmatic change from a one to

many, linear direction, to a one-to-one, multiple networked communication flux, that presupposes more consumer participation in the process and, eventually, its empowerment (Melo, 2013).

These paradigm shifts pose a number of challenges to brands and corporations, both at the commercial and institutional level, namely on their capability to respond, forecast and manage the "feedback nightmare" — some organisations are having trouble to deal with the unpredictable proactivity of consumer and citizens, adopting either denial or panic behaviours that to not contribute to their reputation in a positive manner (Melo & Sousa, 2013). We would draw our attention to some other cases that specialised media took as resourceful material to demonstrate consumer and citizen global empowerment. The cases of GAP, the global fashion brand — whose rebranding efforts in 2010 lasted only a week, doomed at birth by a wide consumer's protest and a demand for the old logo bursting a few hours short after the new logo was announced in the brand's site (Walsh, 2010) — and Tropicana, the beverage from PepsiCo Inc. — whose 2009 rebranding lasted two months only and resulted in a sales loss of 20% — are good examples of the power balance change, reflecting consumer's symbolic ownership of brands and their activism as stakeholders (Babej, 2011). Concurrently corporations recognize consumer empowerment as one of their management driving forces (Aaker & Meyers, 1994; Baskin, 2012) and are attentive to its upgraded power as the advertising line for a management book on costumer service adverts: "In a world where a single tweet can torpedo your brand, you must empower your employees to solve the problems of empowered costumers" (Bernoff & Schadler, 2010, p. 3).

Such examples configure what can be considered empowerment criteria, including access, capability, motivation, self-awareness and, eventually, consumer literacy. Combined in a perfect storm they provide ideal conditions for the activist consumer to be empowered into an accidental yet impactful citizen with the power to transform society through its action, resulting in a real, social and economic impact.

This consumer-citizen intervenes in the advertising process, and in the capitalist system as well, as a godlike actor much different from the "to buy or not to buy" traditional consumer (Jubas, 2007). The new consumer evolved from capitalism to consumerism (Ewen, 1976; Frank, 1997; Matellart, 1991; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), being more self-aware about the meaning of its actions and implications, exerting ethical and political consumption as a mantra. It has access to information and to technology, it has the power to create and co-create content, shaping media and advertising industry by

its audience choices (Jenkins, 2012); it has the power to destroy brands, boycott products, to built and damage reputations. Armed with multiple, powerful ammunition it acts, decides, influences by providing data and relevant insights (Gibson, 2012) — frequently from the very conception of a product (Melo, 2014) — and even advertises and recommends — see the case of fashion bloggers, for example — the products and brands that fit its values and needs (Klimmt & Hadler, 2011), thus featuring an immaterial control of marketing and the market itself.

As further reflection to a sociological dimension of this phenomenon we might advance the notion that this new power balance, or should we say imbalance, also puts forward the idea of social capital, as a structural element (Lesser, 2000). A form of accumulated wealth due to relationships, social capital can be understood as intangible relational network, different from other types of capital, but still impactful:

> Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage (...) the motivation of others to make resources available on concessionary terms is not uniform. At the broadest level, one may distinguish between consummatory versus instrumental motivations to do so. (Portes, 1998, p. 7)

The concept of social capital finds also a parallel with the dynamics of power control that we find useful to this line of thought, as Alexandro Portes (1998) associates it with the notions of "bounded solidarity":

> The social capital created by tight community networks is useful to parents, teachers, and police authorities as they seek to maintain discipline and promote compliance among those under their charge. Sources of this type of social capital are commonly found in bounded solidarity and enforceable trust, and its main result is to render formal or overt controls unnecessary. (Portes, 1998, p. 7)

Furthermore social capital conveys a form of duality both in its nature, in its implementation through social networks and as a result of its impact.

> Notice that social capital, in the form of social control (...) effects are exactly the opposite of those commonly celebrated in the literature. Whereas bounded solidarity

and trust provide the sources for socioeconomic ascent and entrepreneurial development among some groups, among others they have exactly the opposite effect. Sociability cuts both ways. (Portes, 1998, p. 18)

This portrait reflects similar conditions to the ones observed in the interaction between consumer-citizens and advertising especially when it concerns active communities of consumers and the efforts of corporations to manage and control a fruitful relationship in the new media ecology, leading us to the next reflection on the paradoxical nature of this interaction.

The other side of the flow: paradoxical empowerment

The contemporary bidirectional and multiple networked flux of communication work also in multiple ways. Therefore, the "power to the people" motto, so well condensed in the Vodafone slogan "Power to You", is not costless to the power balance and confrontation between consumers and advertisers. Notwithstanding this messianic discourse and the apparently more democratic and accessible advertising communicational structure, empowered consumer-citizens face still additional challenges.

Taking into account the idiosyncrasies of commercial and symbolic conditions emerging from the interaction of advertising with consumers is important to underline the dimension of power perception by opposition to real power. Consumer behaviour literature somehow coincides the perception of the freedom of choice as a perception of control over one's environment, which particularly might for the digital environment of advertising and social networks communications and adds to the intricate complexity of the empowerment paradox. Although it can be argued that perception is not equivalent to reality, its impact has to be taken in consideration. As Shibly et al. (2015) put it, several authors draw attention to this entangled relation:

> Consumer behaviour has associated the concept of power with that of perceived choice. Botti suggests perceived choice is one of the important types of control, and Hui and Bateson argue that any behavioural or emotional effects caused by the availability of choices can be considered as outcome of perceived control. In this context, control has been defined as the freedom of choosing an alternative from among a choice set, instead of being assigned to the same alternative by an external agent (i.e. other individuals or chance). Thus, providing a consumer with more choice is one of the principles of empowering consumer. (p. 260)

Nevertheless one might ethically question the authentic and genuine nature of this empowerment specially taking into consideration how the concept of choice, as a form of consumer participation in the market, serves a foundational drive for the whole marketing and advertising system (Willcox, 2015).

Participation has been traditionally used to legitimate power both in the media and through the media (Carpentier, 2011), being at the centre of the democratic theory. The advertising industry and corporations and brands follow a similar path, bearing in mind the efficiency and performance of the message, but also the power negotiation it conveys, persuading consumers to play the game — frequently willingly, we might add —, and turning consumer participation in a win-win situation that is at the essence of consumer culture (McAllister & Mazzarella, 2000; Turow & McAllister, 2009). It becomes clear that consumer participation in advertising serves untold and undercover corporative and institutional strategies on which advertising new trends are based upon. Behavioural marketing, search advertising, community building consumers, enthusiastic consumers who are hired to be brand counsellors, personalized advertising, even the possibility to freely choose advertising content, may be considered amongst them.

Paradoxically, by coping with brands, frequently unaware of it, in spite the standard cookies agreement they automatically click on without a second thought, consumers assume a price to pay for their entry in the club: the omnipresent hidden monitoring of their every move, choice, opinion and even intention. A whole research and planning industry neighbour to advertising and management is grounded on this source of relevant and valuable information, posing new or updated ethical questions both to practitioners and theorists (Chung et al., 2015; Jugenheimer et al.; Katz, 2014; Wells, 2014).

Therefore, the interactions between consumer-citizens and the advertising platforms configure what John Sinclair (2012) coined as the "empowerment-exploitation paradox" that could be translated to a simple principle: the more power you have as a consumer the more power you give back to the system in form of data and even accountable work as a *prosumer* (Melo, 2014). This paradoxical empowerment means that the more advertising space consumer-citizens conquer, the more advertising vehicles they become, a free source of precious insights, providing inputs and valuable tools for advertising strategic decisions of which they are frequently unaware of. Giving consumers the power to decide, to choose and to participate, advertising, whose main function is to promote

consumption in the capitalist system, envisages its legitimation and efficiency. Simultaneously, this creative industry enables, promotes and absorbs consumer's inputs as functional operative tools to the advertising process, configuring if nothing else an ambivalent empowerment.

FINAL NOTE, FURTHER CHALLENGES

As a consequence, this duality reflects the enduring advertising chameleonic nature with an even more pervasive update. Furthermore, it replicates grounds for traditional criticism on advertising (Alexander et al., 2011), mainly over its powerfulness, intrusiveness and its manipulative condition, posing further challenges to strategic creativity and to the consumer-citizen as an individual and as a self-aware community as well. The breakthrough over these circumstances, that may fit the metaphor of a never-ending loop of power negotiation, could only be reached by effective empowerment. More consumption awareness, educated consumerism both for consumers and advertisers, promoting ethics and advertising best practices and consistent media and advertising literacy rise in the horizon as resilient and promising paths to attain real empowerment. In the meantime, the empowerment paradox dominates the difficult and ever changing balance between brands, organisations, advertising and consumers and citizens.

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