

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: POLAROID ADVERTISING

NOTA INTRODUTÓRIA: A PUBLICIDADE *POLAROID*

Sara Balonas

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

Sónia Silva

Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Braga, Portugal/Centro de Estudos Filosóficos e Humanísticos, Braga, Portugal/Departamento de Artes e Comunicação, Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Vila Real, Portugal/ Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

Isabel Ruiz-Mora

Departamento de Comunicación Audiovisual y Publicidad, Universidad de Málaga, Málaga, Spain

Advertising language (when “achieved”) opens onto a spoken representation of the world, a representation which has been practised by the world since ancient times and is “narrative”: all advertising *says* the product (its connotation), but *it also tells* something else (its denotation). (Barthes, 1985, p. 169)

We propose to consider advertising as a discourse that derives its power from its capacity to produce and reproduce the meaning of a culture and a society. With remarkable speed and clarity, it generates instant portraits, akin to polaroids, where everyone either recognises themselves or prefers not to.

What does advertising show us? For many, advertising is still primarily associated with consumption, representing everything that drags us towards the apocalypse as the effects of climate change become more tangible. Hence, this thematic edition — “Advertising and Sustainable Development” — seems to announce visions of advertising’s unsustainability. However, this issue prompts us to adopt a different perspective: to explore the relationship between two concepts, breaking down the apparent antagonism and shedding light on both the contributions and challenges of advertising.

Indeed, if we seek a vivid portrait of each era — including technological advances, social norms, expectations, anxieties, contradictions, and tensions — we need only examine advertising campaigns. It is crucial to remember that advertising reflects the tensions within a society. Nowadays, alongside environmental concerns, social issues dominate campaigns: gender equality, freedom of expression, inclusion, and diversity are just a few examples.

Advertising possesses the power to summarise, yet it also wields influence over our choices. It showcases what is dominant, both at its best and at its worst, while also shaping new attitudes and behaviours. Through its captivating and persuasive discourse, it

informs and recommends choices that can promote healthy outcomes, whether in terms of our physical or mental well-being or support of more responsible consumption.

Among the prevailing features of contemporary societies, we recognise issues of social and environmental responsibility and sustainability (as well as individual responsibility). Sustainability has become a key priority for today's consumers: approximately 85% of consumers have embraced more sustainable behaviours, and 45% expect sustainability to be a given (Arora et al., 2024). This trend significantly influences purchasing decisions, prompting organisations to allocate more time, attention, and resources to integrating environmental and social responsibility into their business practices. Consequently, it is increasingly common to find products labelled as “environmentally sustainable”, “environmentally friendly”, “fair trade”, and so on, on supermarket shelves (Bar Am et al., 2023).

As previously mentioned, messages promoting companies' ESG¹ strategies are becoming commonplace. Brands are increasingly communicating various aspects of sustainability through advertising campaigns. According to an IPSOS study (Reboul, 2022), “people expect advertisers to act for sustainability. The challenge for brands then resides in balancing the communication for a more sustainable future with the potential to grow sales and market share for the brand” (p. 3). Concepts such as “corporate social responsibility”, “sustainable development”, “corporate political advocacy”, and “corporate citizenship” have become integral to the organisational lexicon.

In this context, it is essential to analyse brands' communication dimensions. How do brands position themselves, and how do they communicate this to citizen-consumers? How are their messages perceived? What are the dominant advertising strategies in this context? What practices should be followed, and what risks should be avoided?

It seems clear that credibility, reputation, and transparency are key factors in communicating sustainability: “not doing so exposes [the brand] to the risk of being accused of greenwashing and facing a media backlash” (Reboul, 2022, p. 13). Indeed, communicating sustainability is complex. The increased public awareness of current environmental and social challenges has led to greater scrutiny and pressure for enhanced transparency in the disclosure of companies' environmental and social performance.

With significant support from the academic community, the editors of this issue compiled the collection of texts presented below, addressing the intersection of advertising and sustainable development. The thematic section of this volume consists of eight articles offering critical analyses, highlighting the tensions that emerge in advertising practices related to the communication of sustainability and social responsibility. The analysis of greenwashing phenomena predominates, with half of the articles addressing this issue. Furthermore, the prevailing ethical and social values in society — particularly emphasising the millennial segment — as well as the ways employed by organisations to position themselves and communicate are themes that permeate all the texts, illustrating how advertising functions as a capillary system.

¹ Acronym for “environmental, social and governance”.

The article “Greenwashing and Disinformation: The Toxic Advertising of Brazilian Agribusiness on Social Media” by Priscila Medeiros, Débora Salles, Thamyres Magalhães, Bianca Melo and Rose Marie Santini opens the thematic section of this Volume 45 dedicated to “Advertising and Sustainable Development”. Focusing on agribusiness, one of Brazil’s main economic sectors, the study aims to identify the presence of greenwashing in the communication strategies of the Parliamentary Agricultural Front, a key player in the anti-environmental lobby. To this end, the authors conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 158 advertisements published by the Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (Parliamentary Agricultural Front) in 2023 on the social networks Facebook and Instagram, searching for attempts to “enhance the image of agriculture”. The results of this investigation revealed that, in general, the adverts analysed advocate for maintaining socio-economic relations centred around agribusiness while promoting denialism and misinformation about the economic impacts of this sector.

The paper “Distinguishing Green Marketing From Greenwashing: Insights From Data Analysis of Banco do Brasil S.A. and Natura & Co.”, co-authored by Camila da Costa, Dusan Schreiber, Paola Schmitt Figueiró, and Luciane Pereira Viana, describes a study aimed at identifying the differences between green marketing and greenwashing and their implications for companies’ social and environmental development practices. To achieve this, the researchers employed a multiple case study methodology, focusing on the examples of Banco do Brasil S.A. and Natura & Co. Through the analysis of various documents, including annual reports and content published on institutional websites, the authors of this work established that both organisations adhere to ethical and truthful principles when advertising their social and environmental sustainability initiatives, thus supporting the green marketing model over greenwashing.

In the article “Greenwashing — The Danger of Generalised False Claims and How the Portuguese Media Represent This Practice” by Lauralice Ribeiro and Paula Campos Ribeiro, the objective was to understand how two Portuguese newspapers, *Expresso* and *Público*, reported on the results of the “Race to Zero” campaign, launched by the United Nations, which aimed for companies to reduce their carbon emissions by 2023 voluntarily. Specifically, this research aimed to explore how these media outlets approached the issue of greenwashing and how they sought to highlight the results of the “Race to Zero” campaign. For this purpose, the researchers conducted a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the news published in the online versions of the newspapers throughout the campaign’s dissemination period in 2022 and 2023. The findings of this study suggest that the national media still allocates limited attention to the issue of greenwashing. However, when they do cover it, they tend to approach it critically.

The article “Advertising and Sustainability: The Case of ‘The Last Photo’ Campaign” by Priscila Kalinke da Silva, Carlos Henrique Sabino Caldas, Luiz Antonio Feliciano and Rogério Gomes Neto examines the role of advertising as an agent of social and environmental transformation by analysing the most awarded advertising campaign at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival — “The Last Photo” — which tackled the stereotypes surrounding the topic of suicide. Through a qualitative methodology using a discursive approach that considered lexical elements, argumentative techniques and non-verbal components, the analysis concluded that the campaign seeks to use advertising discourse, particularly its

audiovisual dimension, to address a social issue, challenging the stereotypes surrounding suicide.

The article “Not Very Instagrammable: Sustainability in the Digital Communication of Portuguese Designer Fashion Brands” by Pedro Dourado presents a study on how Portuguese fashion designers address sustainability on Instagram. Analysing posts by 47 designers who participated in ModaLisboa or Portugal Fashion, the research shows that only around 6% of the content is related to sustainability. Most posts focus on showcasing final products rather than discussing production processes, materials, or labour practices. This study highlights a gap in the promotion of sustainability, suggesting that although designer fashion has the potential to lead in sustainable practices, its digital communication strategies do not fully capitalise on it.

In “Sustainability Struggles: Discursive Tensions in Latin American Cosmetic Industry”, Adriana Angel and Alejandro Álvarez-Nobell investigate how leading cosmetics brands in Latin America communicate their sustainability initiatives and corporate social responsibility. Focusing on Avon, Natura, O Boticário and Yanbal, the study employs qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse interactions on social media and the discourses used by these brands. The results reveal significant tensions between sustainability and capitalism, corporate impact and consumer agency and empowerment and traditional gender roles, highlighting the complexities and contradictions in promoting sustainability within a capitalist framework.

The authors of “Understanding the Role of IKEA Portugal’s Brand Values in Shaping the Purchase Decisions of Millennial Consumers”, Nuno Goulart Brandão and Bárbara Côrte, investigate the impact of IKEA Portugal’s brand values on the purchasing behaviour of millennials. Using a quantitative methodology and surveying 402 respondents, the research underscores that values such as cost-consciousness, sustainability, social responsibility, and simplicity significantly influence millennials’ purchasing decisions. The findings emphasise the importance of brand values in shaping consumer behaviour, indicating that millennials prioritise brands that align with their ethical and social values.

The article “Lifestyle Eco-Influencers Advertising: Is Engagement Driven by Content or Fandom?” by Bárbara Castillo-Abdul, Luis M. Romero-Rodríguez, and Carlos Fernández-Rodríguez investigates the impact of social capital and personal branding on eco-influencer engagement. Through a quantitative analysis of the content of five eco-influencer accounts from the United Kingdom, the United States, Belgium, Spain and Peru, the research unveils fundamental insights into the engagement dynamics of these content creators, contributing to the theory of social capital by demonstrating how personal content and emotional appeals not only increase authenticity but also impact how influencers engage with their audiences. This combination of personal and activist content demonstrates that influencers’ social capital is a key factor in promoting environmental issues, albeit with a tendency to prioritise the influencer’s personality over their activist message.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is supported by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UIDB/00736/2020 (base funding) and UIDP/00736/2020 (programme funding).

REFERENCES

- Arora, A., Freundt, T., Gregg, B., Hajro, N., Meder, C., & Schumacher, K. (2024, March 26). *How playing offense on sustainability can power e-commerce performance*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/growth-marketing-and-sales/our-insights/how-playing-offense-on-sustainability-can-power-e-commerce-performance>
- Bar Am, J., Doshi V., Malik, A., & Noble S. (2023, February 6). *Consumers care about sustainability —And back it up with their wallets*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/consumers-care-about-sustainability-and-back-it-up-with-their-wallets>
- Barthes, R. (1985). *A aventura semiológica* (M. de Santa Cruz, Trans.). Edições 70. (Original work published 1985)
- Reboul, M. (2022). *Sustainability and advertising*. IPSOS Views.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Sara Balonas is an assistant professor at the University of Minho and a researcher at the Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS). She holds a PhD in Communication Sciences, specialising in advertising within the social sphere, and she teaches strategic communication, brands, advertising, and creativity. Her research interests include advertising and behavioural change, social change, strategic communication, brands, creativity, political communication, health communication, and social marketing. She has authored numerous articles, books, and other scientific publications in these fields. Additionally, she coordinates Createlab — Experimentation and Innovation Laboratory (CECS) and the Communication, Organisations, and Social Dynamics research group (CECS). She previously coordinated the Advertising Working Group of the Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences. Furthermore, she is the founder of B+ Comunicação (2002) and Be True, a strategic intervention programme in the social sphere (2010).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0885-1718>

Email: sarabalonas@ics.uminho.pt

Address: Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, 4710-057 Gualtar, Braga, Portugal

Sónia Silva is a visiting assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa — Braga Regional Centre. Since 2020, she has also been a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Arts and

Communication at the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro. She teaches Organisational and Strategic Communication and is responsible for various subjects related to advertising, public relations, marketing communication consultancy and protocol and event organisation. Additionally, she has taught cross-disciplinary subjects such as Communication Theories, Research Methodology, Sociology of Communication, Methodology and Quantification of Information and Scientific Communication. Since 2015, she has also been a collaborating member of the Communication and Society Research Centre and, since 2024, an integrated member of the Centre for Philosophical and Humanistic Studies. Her research focuses on organisational and strategic communication, social responsibility, advertising and public relations.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8166-9851>

Email: sonsilva@ucp.pt

Address: Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Rua de Camões, 4710-362, Braga, Portugal

Isabel Ruiz-Mora serves as an associate professor at the University of Malaga (Spain) within the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising. She teaches courses on Public Relations and Transmedia in both undergraduate and graduate programmes. Engaged in various funded projects focusing on lobbying, sustainability, urban processes, and gender perspectives in the railway sector at both national and European levels. Her research interests include citizen activism, sustainability, and strategic communication. Isabel Ruiz-Mora is also an editor for the *International Journal of Public Relations* and has held positions as a senior lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University and as a visiting researcher at several institutions, including the University of Stirling (Scotland), Roskilde University (Denmark), University of Sheffield (England), University of Leeds (England), and TAR-UC College (Malaysia). She is actively involved in AcademicasPR, a collaborative platform dedicated to studying and promoting the work and research of academic women in the field of public relations, and *Relaciones Públicas al Descubierto* (Public Relations in the Spotlight), a series of podcasts aimed at showcasing the contributions of public relations to society.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0723-9850>

Email: isabelruiz@uma.es

Address: Facultad de Ciencia de la Comunicación. Campus de Teatinos s/n. 29071 Málaga, España



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.