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Masking as a Persuasive Strategy in Advertising for the Young

Abstract

Young people today live in a media culture where the content they access and circulate through by means of different audiovisual technological devices is part of their informal education. In this context, the traditional advertising inserted into these media is giving way to new strategies through which advertising is masked within other content consumed by young people. They believe they are sufficiently well-informed to consider advertising's influence on them to be relative, and claim to be equipped with effective strategies that immunize them against it. However, as argued in this article, current advertising is implementing new persuasive forms that go unnoticed. We present an empirical investigation involving 154 students. Through an interactive computing device, the students processed a total of 223 stimuli corresponding to a graphic communication medium. The dependent variables include the degree of success in identifying the presence of advertising in the stimuli and reaction time. The results show how new masking strategies in advertising hinder young people's awareness that they are receiving advertising messages. This facilitates a failure to create counter-arguments. The results of this work open up the discussion of whether it is relevant to make known to young people, as part of their education and training, these current effective advertising strategies deriving from informal education systems.

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1. Introduction: from traditional advertising to masked advertising

At the beginning of the 21st century, it seemed that advertising had been sufficiently unmasked by young people. Its explicit messages, located in spaces that were perfectly defined in the media, were sufficiently well-known and identifiable by young people, given the informal learning about its codes they had received since infancy. Knowing where the advertising was allowed them to develop their counter-arguments to thus attempt to deflect any possible persuasive influence. As Kapferer (1985: 34) concluded, from a review of empirical studies, «the child acquires, from the age of three, the codes that allow it to differentiate what advertising is from what it is not». However, things have been changing at an accelerated pace in the last few years. Advertising is modifying the way it targets young people. Its renewed efficiency is enhanced by the current context of young people's relationship with technical and technological devices. In this multi-screen cultural environment (Pérez-Tornero, 2008), with bidirectional and multidirectional communication, certain features stand out which contribute to configuring their informal education. In the first place, young people's lives are immersed in a culture of audiovisual entertainment (Martínez, 2011). They use the media to get information, but especially for entertainment, acting with confidence as, in general, they consider that the content serves for enjoyment, not for persuasion (Shrum, 2004; Nabi & Beth, 2009; Sayre & King, 2010). In the second place, and fostered by new technologies, there is a framework of cognitive hyperstimulation (Klingberg, 2009). It is enough to imagine the stimuli received by a passer-by today in a city in comparison with those he or she would have received at the beginning of the last century (Bermejo, 2011a). Thirdly, the aforementioned phenomenon of cognitive hyperstimulation is accompanied by an increase in multitasking or dual-tasking. One of the consequences of being online often is that the amount of stimuli reaching young people today is greater than it was a few years ago (Klingberg, 2009). At the current time, it is not unusual to see young people focusing on their mobiles while they do other school activities or being interrupted by the sudden arrival of a message on their telephones, or to see university students who are attending their classes and at the same time consulting their computers in front of them, connected to the Internet (Jeong & Fishbein, 2007). This set of phenomena has introduced into the lives of young people new ways to mobilise different types of attention. The duration of voluntary or controlled periods of attention, which depends on a conscious effort to carry out a task (for example, paying attention in class or studying) is reduced by the arrival of external stimuli, which are increasingly abundant, which interrupt this period and give rise to stimulus-driven attention. This latter situation leads us to change our current focus of attention to another focus which breaks into our receptive stimuli field. Given that our processing abilities are limited, the working memory has to share its scant resources among several stimulations, thus diminishing its capacity to process with total relevance all the stimuli it is dealing with simultaneously. One detail provided by this current research is that the fuller the working memory, through having to deal with several stimuli at the same time, the greater the difficulty involved in concentrating through controlled attention, and the

greater the chances of becoming distracted and of processing in a superficial manner the stimuli that are competing among themselves to get our attention (Ophir & al., 2009; Heylighen, 2008). This multi-stimulation cultural context creates attention-related habits that later affect the attention-related processes required by formal education at school, and explains in part the observations of certain teachers who complain about the current inattention levels of their students over prolonged periods.

Within this cultural framework, advertising, which has seen how the attention paid to its messages has been decreasing in conventional media, has been searching for new ways to attract the attention of consumers (Heath, 2012). It is directing its greatest efforts and attention towards new media, particularly the Internet, in so-called post-advertising society (Solana, 2010). These new marketing strategies have drawn the attention of researchers, partly due to the innovative aspect of these strategies and also because young people are exposed to them through the Internet, social networks (Sanagustin, 2009) and new activities consisting of audiovisual virtual entertainment (Martí, 2010). This is making that fact that conventional media, which continue to feature strongly, are also evolving become forgotten. They are in pursuit of new strategies to manipulate attention and thus attract their targets through renewed forms of persuasion. Please remember that traditional, or classic, advertising, inserted into conventional media, has used, throughout the 20th century, a persuasive strategy aimed at grabbing the conscious, voluntary attention of its targets. It considered that once it had managed to attract their attention to its message, the content thereof could persuade them. This type of advertising, which is still chiefly in force today, has certain well-defined features. One of the most characteristic features is its clear demarcation of genre. Its insertion in a restricted space in the media that contains them means that there is no mixing of genre. In the press, on the page there is a framed space for advertising which is thus separated from the news and reports. On the radio or television, there are also blocks for advertising with well-established codes that are learnt from the earliest years of childhood (Minot & Laurent, 2002; Dagnaud, 2003, Gunter & al., 2005). A second feature of classic advertising is that it simulates a two-way or dialogic process (Bajtin, 1991; Linell, 1998, Adam & Bonhomme, 2000). Dialogue in daily life implies two-way communication between those speaking and the participants in the dialogue. However, advertising can only send one-way messages through conventional media and therefore cannot establish, in the strictest sense, two-way communication and, therefore, real dialogue. Nonetheless, this has not prevented advertising from simulating direct dialogue with its public as if there were really bidirectional communication (Bermejo, 2013a).Together with this classic advertising, a new type of advertising is currently appearing. Recently we have been able to identify a new persuasive advertising strategy in current graphic communication media, which we have called «masking» and which until now had not been detected (Bermejo & al., 2011). Masking implicates our attention in a different manner to the manner which advertising had been using thus far, by targeting involuntary attention as opposed to voluntary attention. This strategy is characterised by the deletion of genre codes, by the hybridisation of genre by inserting and concealing

advertising in other communicational genres, and, in third place, by the staging of a new dialogism (Bermejo, 2013a). In this initial research, we have identified the presence of three types of new graphic advertising in the written media in Spain which comprise three manifestations of this persuasive strategy of masking. We have named them embedded advertising, neoadvertorials and self-referent advertising.

These three modalities of masking advertising are characterised in this manner because the subject accesses an informative text incorporating an advertising message which, since that message is not highlighted or demarcated by codes which establish it as an independent text, is concealed within the text containing it. An example of embedded advertising can be found in interviews with celebrities and public figures. In the article, as the interviewee answers the questions posed by the interviewer, the celebrity recounts aspects of his or her life which include, in these cases, him or her alluding to using specific products and brands. Secondly, although advertorials were already being used in below-the-line advertising, there are two features of neoadvertorials that differentiate them from advertorials. One is that the genre-identifying code, which is found in the heading of the page or within the frame for the advertising text («special promotional feature», etc.) and which warns the reader about the content, disappears. A second feature is that neoadvertorials present themselves to the reader under the appearance of real articles attempting to inform the reader about a specific issue of their interest (e.g. how to make a festive meal, what presents to give or how to fight hair loss, etc.). Throughout the text, allusions are be made to products and brands that can help the reader to solve their problem or meet their need for information. Therefore, the advertising message appears in this type of text at a precise moment and by way of a suggestion that will serve the reader when deciding on the issue that led him or her to read the article. Finally, as in the previous case, self-referent advertising erases the codes that allow the reader to perceive and immediately classify the text as belonging to the promotional genre or as conventional self-promotional texts. While in traditional or classic advertising self-promotion meant an explicit text which invited the reader to consume the product or service, in this new, self-referent advertising a text is offered that is of interest to the reader into which self-promoting messages, through icons or text, have been slipped. For example, in Cosmopolitan magazine (nº 243; pages 82-93), which has been included in the empirical research detailed later on in this text, the reader finds photographs and descriptions of a party attended by numerous public figures, singers and actors, among others. As a background to several of the photographs where the celebrities are posing for the cameras, the logotype of the organiser of the event can be clearly seen, i.e. Cosmopolitan magazine, as well as explicit references to the brand. Even though the accent in the article is placed on the glamorous aspects of the event and on satisfying the possible curiosity of the reader as to, among other things, the dresses and attire of the guests, the party is subtly accompanied throughout by the sponsoring brand which made the event possible (Bermejo, 2013a).

This new strategy of masking advertising, through these three modalities we have been able to identify, targets involuntary attention, unlike traditional advertising

which targets voluntary attention. The question arises as to how young people react to this type of advertising strategy and the potential persuasive influence it can have on them. In this article, we present the results of a study which investigates for the first time, taking an empirical approach, the influence on young people of this new advertising strategy.

2. Experimental study of masking advertising

2.1. Material and methods

In a previous study, in 2011, we investigated the presence of new, graphic advertising within advertising in Spain as a whole. Having analysed all the types and categories of publications in the Spanish market which insert advertising and which can be bought at newsagents and bookshops, a representative corpus was selected that covered 232 publications, with a total of 26,930 pages, of which 7,183 included advertising, making a total of 7,771 adverts (Bermejo, 2011d). Analysing this corpus of adverts revealed that this new strategy of masking advertising is already present to a certain extent in the press and represents a quarter of the total, adding together the three manifestations of the strategy (embedded advertising, neoadvertorials and self-referent advertising) (Bermejo, 2011c).
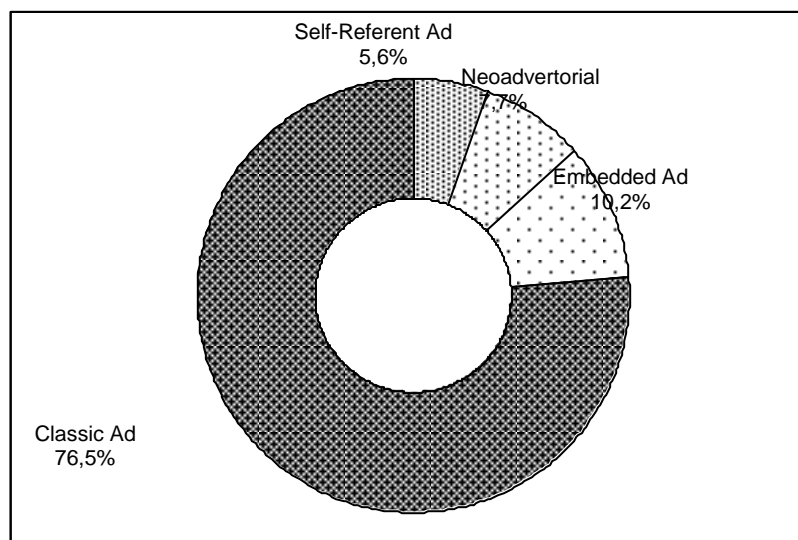

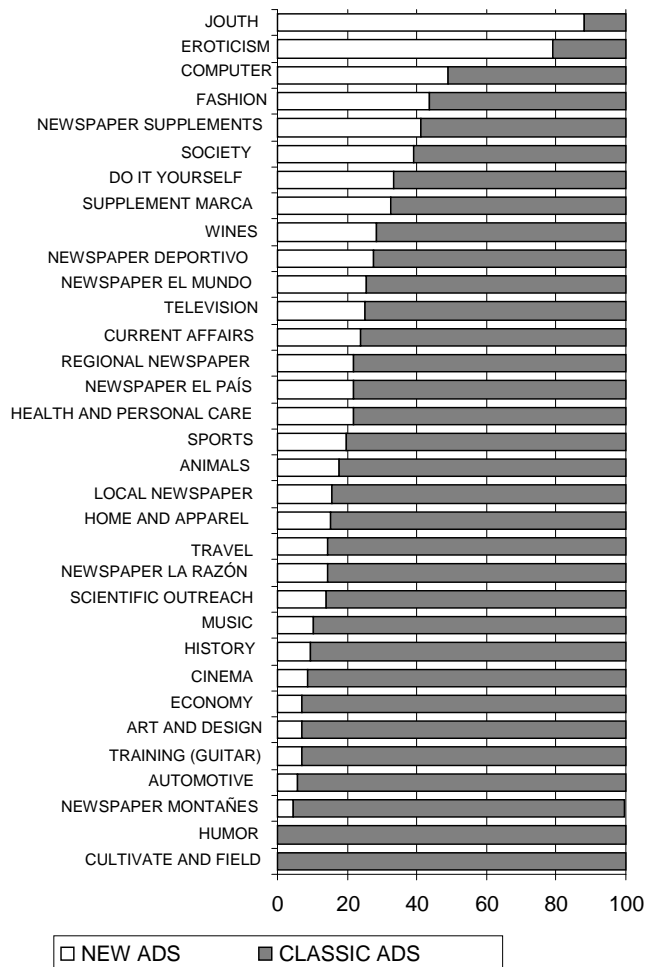Figure 1. Types of advertising in the corpus of graphic advertising.

Figure 2. Types of advertising in the different categories of publications.

As can be seen in Figure 2, even when the three new advertising modalities (neo-advertising) appear in the majority of the publication categories, it is interesting to observe that they are concentrated above all in certain categories with common elements: Youth (which includes magazines such as «Loka Magazine», «Super Pop», «Ragazza», «Bravo por Ti», etc.) reaching 87.9% of the total number of adverts in the publications included in this category, Eroticism (79%), Fashion (with publications such as «Elle», «Tendencias», «Glamour», «Vogue», «Telva», etc.), representing 43.6%; Newspaper Fashion, such as «Dona», representing 41.1%, and Society (with over twenty publications including «Lecturas», «Cosmopolitan», «Pronto», «Hola») reaching 39.2%. These five categories of publications have to do with relations among individuals in a social setting, with trends, values and social uses. Many of these include patterns of conduct, values and social actions with which the advertising is associated, in accordance with the camouflaged style of the three modalities of new advertising described above.

Therefore, this new persuasive strategy already has a significant presence in graphic advertising and is found in practically all publication categories. An interesting conclusion arising from this study is that masked advertising appears

significantly in publications read by young people. A general aim suggested by this result is to find out if this new type of advertising influences them.

2.2. Objectives

The overarching objective of the study is to assess if the subjects, after being asked to look at a magazine (on sale at newsagents and bookshops) which inserts advertising, perceive and identify with the same degree of difficulty the four types of advertising, namely classic advertising, embedded advertising, neoadvertorials and self-referent advertising. It concerns finding out it the factor of masking, which is missing in classic advertising and present through different forms of expression in the other three types of advertising, has any influence on their ability to identify the presence of advertising in those pages. The masking has been used as an experimental technique to differentiate the conscious and unconscious processing of stimuli (Froufe & al., 2009). In our case, we understand masking to be that process used not in the laboratory but in the social environment by a new type of advertising, which consists of erasing genre markers, including the advertising message within the text of another informative genre which contains it and, thirdly, establishing a type of specific dialogism, described above in this text.

For this study, the Cosmopolitan magazine was selected as stimulatory material. This magazine belongs to the category of publications about society and was chosen because it contains abundant examples of classic advertising and new advertising and, in addition, because it is part of a general category of publications, together with publications for young people, that young people today read on a regular basis.

2.3. Experimental procedure

A total of 154 university students in the final year of their degrees in advertising and public relations, aged between 21 and 23 years old, took part in the study. The sample, made up of young men (24.7%) and young women (75.3%), was selected as it was deemed an expert group that is familiar with advertising messages in the media. Therefore it was to be expected that they would have no difficulty identifying advertising in conventional written media.

In the experimental situation, the participants performed the task individually on a computer onto which the program SuperLab 4.1, had been loaded, allowing the user's responses to be recorded. During the session, the subject visualised 224 screens corresponding to each of the pages, including the cover and back cover, of issue number 243 of the society magazine known as «Cosmopolitan». The task indicated in relation to this independent variable is that the subject presses the letter «S» key if the page being viewed contains advertising or the letter «N» key if the page does not contain advertising. When a response is entered, the program moves on to the next screen, and so on. Before starting, and in relation to the dependent variables taken into consideration, the subject was informed that both the accuracy of the response in identifying the presence of advertising on the

page and the time taken to respond (Reaction Time in milliseconds, recorded by the software installed on the computer) will be taken into account.

A prior selection and classification of the advertising in the magazine found a total of 155 advertising stimuli (i.e. 155 of the 224 screens contained advertising). Those 155 stimuli were classified under 7 typologies or modalities of advertising, resulting from taking into consideration two variables of the stimulus: a) type of advertising and b) amount of space taken up by the advert on the page. Table 1 contains the breakdown of the 224 pages of the magazine based on those two criteria. Categories T2, T3 y T4 correspond to stimuli including classic advertising. The following four categories (T5 to T8) correspond to the three types of new advertising. These four types include self-referent advertising, advertorials, embedded advertising within full-page text and, finally, embedded advertising partially within the text occupying half or a quarter of a page.

Table 1. Classification of typologies of advertising stimuli		
Typologies of advertising stimuli	N° stimuli (pages)	% total
T1. page without ads	69	30,8
T2. Classic advertising (full page)	64	28,6
T3. Several classic advertising on the same page	7	3,1
T4 Several classic advertising on a fraction of the page	7	3,1
T5. Self-referent ad (full page)	17	7,6
T6. Neoadvertorial (full page)	41	18,3
T7. Ad embedded (full page)	12	5,4
T8. Ad embedded occupying half or a quarter of the page	7	3,1

To keep the experimental design balanced with respect to the number of stimuli, seven pages corresponding to each of the seven categories of advertising stimuli were used in the statistical analysis, with the exception of the category of a page including a quarter with five items.

2.4. Hypothesis

The general hypothesis is that there is a differential perception between the four types of advertising described above.

H1: Classic advertising is noticed better that new advertising (self-referent advertising, neoadvertorials and embedded advertising), that is, accuracy in identifying classic advertising is greater than that of identifying masked advertising. This implies that, as the accuracy rate for identifying classic advertising is greater, part of the new advertising goes unnoticed.

H2: The subject takes less time to identify classic advertising than he/she does with new advertising. This second, supplementary entry illustrates the difficulty experienced by the subject in perceiving the masked advertising in the graphic text.

3. Results: the efficiency of persuasion of masked advertising in relation to young people

The first analysis has been done on the proportion of skill in correctly identifying the pages containing advertising. The advertising method shows clear differences in the proportion of people who correctly identify the presence of advertising in the pages of the magazine. The first two typologies of advertising, T2 and T3, are correctly identified in 99.1% and 90.2% of the cases (table 2). With a slightly lower rate of correct answers is the advertising that occupies a fraction of the page, which obtained an 87.2% correct identification rate. Therefore, these are advertising categories that cause us no type of trouble in classifying them as advertising, and they could be called classic advertising. The other four categories of stimuli, which correspond with masking ads, show a proportion of correct responses that is appreciably lower, as can be seen in the table. Self-referent advertising has a 66.7% correct identification rate, neoadvertorials obtain 57.9%, and advertising embedded in the text obtains 64.1% and 62.6% respectively. The four typologies represent advertising stimuli in formats or manners of presentation that are less evident in the classification of advertising. To create a record of the differences, a within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been carried out and it has been verified that these differences are statistically significant ($F=150.85$, sig.=.000). Therefore, hypothesis 1 is confirmed and brings up a different perception between the two types of advertising.

Proportion of skill in correctly identifying the correctly pages containing advertising and reaction time by typology of advertising stimuli				
Typologies of advertising stimuli	Proportion of skill		Reaction time (seconds)	
	Mean	σ	Mean	σ
T2. Classic advertising (full page)	,991	,05	9,26	4,46
T3. Several classic advertising on the same page	,902	,27	15,26	11,27
T4. Several classic advertising on a fraction of the page	,872	,19	16,40	8,05
T5. Self-referent ad (full page)	,667	,27	23,95	10,90
T6. Neoadvertorial (full page)	,579	,22	24,38	15,14
T7. Ad embedded (full page)	,641	,25	24,64	13,08
T8.Ad embedded occupying half or a quarter of the page	,626	,29	22,22	14,40

The reaction time is the second variable recorded in the analysis and reflects the degree of processing required to give a response for each stimulus. In table 2, the results obtained are shown for each type of stimulus. An increase can be seen in the average time devoted to the processing of the image before giving a response as the stimulus passes from classic advertising to new advertising. In the full-page adverts the average time was 9.26 seconds, the category that contains several adverts on the same page obtained a slightly longer average processing time (15.26 seconds), and this was somewhat higher in the following category (16.40 seconds). The other four types of remaining stimuli, which corresponds with new advertising or masking ads, show a substantial increase in the time devoted to

the processing, given that the average reaction time was situated between 22.2 and 24.64 seconds. Once again, a within-subjects analysis of variance, ANOVA, has been carried out and it has been discovered that the differences between the seven categories are statistically significant (F=189.3; sig.=.000). In fact, a second within-subjects analysis of variance carried out on the last four advertising categories does not show statistically significant differences (F=2.687; sig. =.055).

Therefore, the analysis of this second variable shows that the decrease in the rate of correct responses for the advertising categories called neo-advertising is not due to a lack of attention, given that clearly the subjects have spent more time in giving a response. Therefore, it can be deduced that the difficulty of classifying these pages has required greater cognitive resources from the participants in the study.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study give rise to a debate about four issues. The first issue refers to the shift in persuasive strategies used by advertising to communicate with young people and which would be changing from targeting the conscious to targeting the subconscious. It is necessary to remember that subconscious is not the same as subliminal. The latter type of stimulation operates under the level of sensitive processing and, as is apparent in the study and meta-analysis, the influence of subliminal advertising on consumer decisions is not significant (Moore, 1982; Trappey, 1996). However, a subconscious process takes place when the advertising can be seen or heard, even if it does not attract the attention of the subject (Heath, 2007: 22). Unlike subliminal advertising, studies like that of Shapiro, Macinnis and Heckler (1997) have empirically confirmed that the subconscious processing of advertising can influence purchasing decisions.

Until recently, there was a notion that we assimilated only that which had passed through our conscious minds. This meant that advertising strategy sought to attract the conscious attention of its public. It was thought that what was retained through this channel could be recovered from memory and thus have an influence on favourable attitudes towards the brand, whereas that which was not processed by this voluntary channel was lost and did not influence our subsequent behaviour. According to this model, the interpretation of the results of this study would be that masked advertising would not be efficient, that is, would not influence the reader's mind, given that it had not been perceived in a conscious manner. However, recent breakthroughs in psychology and neuroscience have demonstrated that there are three forms of processing the stimuli that can later influence our behaviour (Klingberg, 2009; Heath, 2012). There is active learning, which occurs through high-attention, fully-conscious thinking, which commonly uses the foveal system. Secondly, there is passive learning, occurring through a low-attention focus, which uses above all the parafovea. Lastly, a third type of peripheral attention, which leads to so-called implicit learning, which occurs without the subject paying attention to the stimulus of any of the other two forms of attention. According to this third type of learning, the subject may not be aware of having perceived a stimulus and, despite this, may have assimilated it

both sensorially and conceptually (Shapiro & al., 1997). In the light of these advances in knowledge about attention and learning processes, which indicate that implicit earning can occur through low attention and peripheral attention, the interpretation of the results of this study can be addressed from the perspective of possible future persuasive effects on young people. Given the context of exposure, where the subject is explicitly invited to look at images on a screen and make decisions regarding these, we have a task where the requirements for general processing are conscious and voluntary, requiring high attention in top-down processing controlled by the objectives (Eysenk & Keane, 2000: 2). However, the interesting thing is that, despite this particular context, a significant part of the subjects process the stimuli with low attention levels. It is as if, in fact, the effective processing had followed a bottom-up processing strategy in which the learning occurs unnoticed and is controlled by the stimuli and not by the subject's objectives. This explains errors committed by the subjects which, if their level of attention had been increased, would not have occurred given their prior level of expertise in advertising. The incorrect verbal response given by our subjects indicates that they have not sufficiently processed the presence in the stimulus of a considerable part of the masked advertising. However, this does not mean to say that they have not processed it. That would have occurred either with a low attention level or even at a subconscious level, through peripheral attention. As scientific literature, through the study of the priming effect, has been able to show, stimuli processed through implicit learning can have a subsequent effect on behaviour, although this does not manifest itself through a conscious effort to recover the information (Harris & al., 2009). Therefore, this shift in strategy experienced in advertising, which is leading it to change from using strategies targeting the conscious mind to using strategies aimed at the subconscious mind and implicit learning, can be highly efficient as regards advertising since, as we have demonstrated here, these strategies go unnoticed by our subjects.

The second issue that arises from these results is that they reveal a new type of relationship with the reader. The dialogism of classic advertising has been using a process of direct dialogue. Once the reader's attention has been grabbed, from then on classic advertising deploys argumentative strategies focusing on the source and the message, where the enunciator offers a promise about a brand/product (Bermejo, 2011 b). Conversely, the type of masked advertising we have identified uses another form of dialogism. Within it, communication is undertaken around a matter or subject of information that interests the reader. In this process, this being the centrepiece of the communication, the product or brand is shifted, although not absent. Simulated dialogue in traditional advertising is replaced in masked advertising by a dialogic meeting around content attracting the reader (Bermejo, 2013a). At the same time, in this new communication context, the rational-emotional dichotomous axis fades into the background in favour of attention processes and conditioning processes, according to the mechanism already described by Paulov and reaffirmed by contemporary psychology and neuroscience (Health, 2012). As Health has demonstrated experimentally, the issue is no longer about advertising being more rational or emotion-

al, but about the perceptive context in which exposure to advertising which induces a specific degree of processing and counterarguing (Heath & al., 2009).

In third place, if, as these results indicate, the masking strategy means that advertising in the media passes unnoticed to the conscience, individuals can end up with the impression that advertising, which was extremely invasive in the last years of the 20th century, is beginning to move beyond the media. However this, as we have seen, would be nothing but an illusion as it continues to be present. One of the consequences of this lack of perception is that the individual relaxes and does not become defensive or create counterarguments against the masked advertising messages. As we have known for some time, counter-argumentation is a powerful mediating variable in the message acceptance response (Wright, 1980; Knowles & Linn, 2004; Petrova & al., 2012). When the subject uses a counterargument, the likelihood of being persuaded is reduced as the subject's cognitive response runs contrary to the arguments offered by the advertising message. The deployment of the masking stratagem in other media can, paradoxically, lead to advertising persuasion becoming even more efficient in the future than nowadays since the subject, as he or she does not perceive the stimuli consciously, does not see the need to counterargue.

Fourthly and finally, and no less importantly, a reflection emerges from this study about the media literacy of young people in this new era of multichannel communication. The recent rediscovery of the so-called cognitive unconscious (Hassin & al., 2005; Froufe & al., 2009) has made us see that we are also capable of processing information presented peripherally, without being aware of it. If this study is an illustration of that phenomenon, this new knowledge about our capabilities, already used by advertising, suggests the possible need of making known to young people these sales procedures, which target not conscious attention but peripheral attention, so that they can, based on this knowledge, make their own individual decisions with a greater degree of freedom. This heightened awareness would thus begin to form part of their personal education process.

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