THE MYTH OF CSR ON THE EXAMPLE OF DOVE CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the particular case of a controversial Dove campaign for Real Beauty (CFRB) and its role in the production and consumption of contemporary popular meanings of empowerment, social change, and female beauty in global consumer culture. Because in some instances such corporate strategies appear well received, we move beyond cynical dismissal to analyze corporate discourse to identify its transformative possibilities and contradictions. The analysis replaces the oversimplifying approaches to the ethics of CSR with a communicative perspective that highlights the need for a contextual examination of the ethical dilemmas that arisen from CSR practices.

In this article, I engage with this CSR campaign, using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to uncover its mechanisms and ideological functioning. CDA of the print, television, and new media texts reveals a certain juxtaposition between liberation and oppression of CFRB. The analysis show how Dove was able to transform an ordinary commodity, skin cleansing products, into a consumer activist brand through which consumers could take part in solving self-esteem and social problems.

My analysis of CFRB shows the ways that CSR often operates to co-opte the criticism by embracing it, consolidating brand loyalty and corporate profits, and defuse struggles around consumption. By doing so, CSR forms a complex strategy to legitimize particular brands and commodities, so it can be seen as the ideological force of contemporary consumer capitalism.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, discourse analysis, Dove campaign

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and *cause-related marketing* are becoming one of the fastest developing forms of marketing. Companies boast less frequently about their expansion and profits than even a decade ago. Both communication and management strategies are headed in the direction of "soft elements", the organisation's culture and exposing its involvement. CSR is defined as a direct link between the sale of products or services of an enterprise and commitment to a specific social purpose [1]. In this way, companies are

distinguishing their offer from the competition, which is important in mature, homogenous markets.

There are, however, many doubts as to the ethics of these actions and, paradoxically, the social consequences, which, as it turns out, are not necessarily linked to social good or responsibility. I am inclined to separate the sphere of aid from economic activities. First of all, referring to deontological ethics (e.g. Kantianism), it should be stressed that CSR actions are motivated first of all by the enterprise's own benefit, and, as it were, afterwards some good is produced (help for the needy). Such an action is different from an action that was undertaken out of a sense of duty and concern for others, and at the same time the perpetrator of the action achieved some benefit (e.g. increased sales of its products). Only the latter act deserves moral praise, while the former one at most does not deserve a moral reprimand.

More radical criticism should be directed at the marginalisation and instrumental treatment of persons in need, as well as at commercialisation of aid. If an entrepreneur introduces a CSR mechanism, mostly aimed at increasing sales, leaving the concern about satisfying the needs of beneficiaries in the background, it may turn out that the form and addressees of aid will not be selected because of the existing social needs, but because of business objectives. Such behaviour may lead to some specific kind of exclusion among the excluded, i.e. to a situation in which people in need who belong to selected categories will never be able to count on adequate support. An entrepreneur, for example, knowing that people are more willing to help children, will more often direct his charity initiatives to them than to e.g. seniors or homeless people. Moreover, aid provided through a market mechanism, i.e. within processes over which the beneficiary may not exercise any control, or even participate in the forms of support imposed on him, only deepens the feeling of dependence on others and leads to undermining individual autonomy.

Another argument (cited after Michael Jay Polonsky et al.) undermines the social dimension of CSR in general. Giving new meanings (e.g. helping Africans) to old products, i.e. promoting them as so-called ethical products, leads, firstly, to increasing the (already exceptionally abundant) volume and diversity of products competing for consumers' favour. What is more, it poses a threat of a specific displacement effect, which consists in reducing the involvement of corporations in minimising environmental costs (in improving their own production systems, product distribution, waste utilisation) in favour of involvement in CSR initiatives [2].

Polonsky et al. also point to other potentially socially harmful effects of introducing CSR, i.e. overestimation of corporate generosity that leads, for instance, to a reduction in the volume of aid provided by other donors (both private donors and the state), shifting the scope of NGOs' activities to match corporate expectations, which results in a reduction of aid to beneficiaries,

threatening NGOs' image, increasing consumer scepticism and leading to their reduced support, limiting the way NGOs operate by requiring them to purchase goods from the company they cooperate with as part of CSR, reducing the total volume of funds provided by companies for social purposes (the most efficient tools for providing aid from the corporate point of view do not have to bring in the biggest funds for the needy), as well as developing a 'consumer mentality' in socjety [2].

While market-mediated assistance may provide an opportunity for consumers to develop empathy and sensitivity to the harm of others, helping by purchasing products is morally questionable. It is nothing but the perpetuation of the consumer attitude, according to which helping others makes sense only if it is done with the benefit for the consumer himself. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that a consumer or producer, by indulging in all his inclinations, such as pleasure, convenience and self-interest, deserves moral praise, even if he also contributes to the welfare of others. Rather, the moral value of the subject of an action is linked to his ability to resist these inclinations, to his effort to resist them and to his actions motivated by the good of others. Moreover, using the market to help the poor does not necessarily make consumers more sensitive to the problems of people in need of help; on the contrary, it can weaken this sensitivity. Consumers thus gain a kind of moral alibi, an exemption from further concern and commitment to the needy, since they have already purchased an "ethical product". They gain peace of mind from their decision to choose this brand over another.

Therefore, one may ask: is it not better to help the needy without the mediation of the market and stimulation of additional consumption? If someone wants to support the needy, they do not have to buy any goods for this purpose. Supporters of CSR could appeal here to the utilitarian evaluation of actions, arguing that we are morally justified in choosing the least evil of the available courses of action. Even if the best option would be to support the needy without using the market mechanism, when this seems unlikely, it is better to agree to CSR already generating some costs, than to stop aid activities altogether. In turn, critics of CSR would remind us of Gresham-Copernicus' law, according to which agreeing to the lesser of two evils in given circumstances leads to a kind of negative selection, consisting in lowering moral standards that we are willing to accept. Instead of trying to change people's attitudes from caring only about their own consumer needs to caring about the needs of others, the proponent of the argument presented here tries to use the consumerist attitude to help those in need at least a little. Doing so tends to increase the number of self-interested consumers and companies rather than people who want to relieve the suffering of others.

Supporters of CSR are unanimous in explaining that it should be based on business, customers and non-profit organisations acting together in a partnership based on a "win-win" scenario. Obviously, I am not questioning the fact that an entrepreneur, an NGO, or a consumer can take actions that benefit them and are morally good at the same time. However, the doubts presented here are meant to

counterbalance the arguments of the apologetic discourse on CSR dominating the literature.

For example, Wayne Visser points out that CSRs are a complete failure in addressing real problems associated with sustainable business practices [3]. In turn, Craig Smith and Halina Ward point out that social responsibility issues are often closed off in the "corporate ghetto" and do not affect the fundamental course of business [4]. CSR has not managed, even to a small extent, to curb the negative impact of economic growth and economic activity on social problems. Juxtaposing the indicators with the numerous examples given in the literature of the gradual improvement that CSR is supposed to lead to, it turns out that, if anything, it should only be measured on some micro scale.

The philanthropic generosity of businessmen undoubtedly has a long history. But when it became clear, for instance, that climate change was a serious challenge to sustainability and the fossil fuel industry, all the major oil companies formed the Global Climate Coalition Group to challenge the science of climate change and delay the implementation of international policy solutions to combat it. At the same time, the same business organisations kept on publishing statements about their commitment to pro-social actions.

In marketing practice, social goals are sometimes treated quite cynically, which is exemplified by the widely described phenomena of greenwashing and leanwashing. For instance, supermarkets support schools, establish trade unions, and at the same time, using their market advantage, pay exceptionally low prices to suppliers for their goods and extend payment terms. And it would be difficult to take an unambiguously negative view of such actions, because after all they are in line with the market logic. However, this is where the state and its "minimal interventionism" should come in, i.e. statutory regulations counteracting such practices. The most important in the whole market process are therefore the values, standards and laws that are binding in the society in which the company operates. It is they that should oblige the company to pro-social involvement and following through, and not only the pragmatic decisions of managers who write such postulates into communication strategy documents widely promoted in the media, as in the case of the Dove campaign.

THE CASE OF CSR IN THE DOVE BRAND CAMPAIGN

In 2003, over 70 years since the launch of the Dove soap, the brand communication is still based on the same declaration of willingness to help women *discover the power of true beauty*, to support them in building self-confidence, self-awareness and acceptance. Messages about democratizing female images, breaking stereotypes, caring for clients are combined with commercial recommendations that *every skin is beautiful, you just need to moisturize it properly* (All quotes are from the official campaign website: http://www.dove.com/pl). Three promises are made to women regarding

promotional communication (*Dove Real Beauty Pledge*): (1) Presenting "real" women, never models; (2) Showing women "as they really are"; (3) Helping girls to "love their bodies" and develop self-esteem. Over a period of about 10 years, the Dove Self-Esteem Project has seen over 20 million young people take part in assertiveness empowerment classes, making it one of the most extensive CRM programs in the world. This raises the question of what factors, besides its large reach, have contributed to its effectiveness. A few of the most important ones can be pointed out:

Consistency in implementation of the communication strategy and diversity and creativity of its forms and tools

Numerous ads of the campaign, which has been running for 17 years, show how important it is to think in terms of synergy and integrated communication. Transmedia communication promoting social meanings of the brand took place through social media, interactive videos, applications, the company's portal, and traditional media: TV ads, billboards, public relations (discussions about the campaign on TV and radio; campaign publications, and cooperation with experts). Apart from classic TV spots, advertising films were created and posted on the Internet, tested for readiness to be broadcast online. Questions were placed on traditional campaign billboards to encourage online voting, which was possible after visiting a website designed for this purpose. The potential of online tools was used to the full, as exemplified by the discussion of thousands of women about the "Dove Evolution" spot on the campaign website, which was later taken up by journalists in newspapers and on TV programmes. Similar viral activities included the "Dove True Colors" ad, aired during the Super Bowl broadcast, or the "Real Beauty Sketches" campaign, considered the best viral ad of all time. Equally well developed was the PR base in the form of research reports intended to substantiate the implemented actions. The company also cooperated with many well-known organisations, building a broad coalition for its undertakings.

The social engineering of social engagement and authenticity

In the era of advertising oversaturation, resistance to invasive advertising, the consumer should feel that the brand provides him with "real" meanings, authentic values, even against the interests of their sponsors. The brand should make it possible to experience a common, social world, and most importantly, away from corporations – seemingly disinterestedly. Such "authenticity" can be created by placing the brand in communities, subcultures as an integrating factor for that group, or by conveying certain "life truths", always out of concern for the good of the consumer. The goals of the brand are starting to head beyond the material sphere, the sphere of profits. They are supposed to show a better life, embody human interests, passions and challenges, point to goals that have not been attainable thus far. Only such a deeply emotional core can build brand awareness.

Consequently, it is important to find a way to make the brand relevant, indispensable and authentic for each and every relationship with it. Contact with it is supposed to create the feeling that the external world is common, real, intersubjective and, above all, authentic. The brand enters this world as if completely independent of marketing efforts. It is "authentic", and thus disinterested, perceived as created and popularized by consumers themselves, by "ordinary" people. This is exactly how the Dove campaign has been implemented for years. In social media discussions initiated by the company, girls share their stories, experiences, provide each other with advice and support (behavioural modelling techniques). Teachers use "educational materials" provided by the company. Such a *curriculum* of positive conversation encourages other people to get involved in the action, creating the impression of sincere, authentic, "bottom-up" discourse within the framework of brand communication.

In-depth analysis of target groups

Emotional messages were precisely adjusted to the needs of a girlish personality that is being shaped right now – and these messages made references to the need of acceptance, value, and recognition, as well as problems with satisfying them. The campaign's creators took the conclusions of numerous studies as their starting point.

Lucia Marques Stenzel et al. have shown that the way one's own body is perceived determines the type of relations young people have with other members of their social group [5]. Similar conclusions were reached by Linda Hatch, indicating that girls objectify their own bodies, treating them as objects whose proper appearance could bring them significant benefits [6]. Philip Myers and Frank Biocca, on the other hand, found that viewing up to 30 minutes of media coverage a day negatively influences women's opinions of their own appearance (*self-schemas*), which in turn clearly translates into constant attempts to achieve the ideal promoted by the media [7, p.108]. Such conclusions, concerning the pressure connected with a certain appearance or the low level of acceptance of one's own body among teenagers, were the basis of campaign assumptions about "real beauty".

Until now, Dove was seen as a brand offering products for older people. Without this reorientation of the target group, it was in danger of slowly disappearing from the market along with their aging female consumers. This does not mean, however, that Dove has abandoned its targeting of this group, as it has included it in the message of the "Pro-Age" campaign with its "diversity of beauty".

DECONSTRUCTING THE PROMOTIONAL DISCOURSE OF DOVE BRAND

In my attempt at a critical analysis of discourse, I am inclined to see it in Jacques Derrida's terms as a "second reading," consisting in tracking down the excluded interpretation that forms a certain hidden current of the text [8]. Equally important are the assumptions of Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault, according to which questions about the functioning of certain meanings are intertwined with questions about their relations with the social and institutional environment, which influences the production of utterances in a given time and place. I will show that the meanings of discourse in the campaign conducted for the Dove brand do not refer to the contestation of the *status quo;* on the contrary, they strongly reinforce this *status quo* – as they stem from the laissez-faire concept of individualism with its demands about the free shaping of identity within the framework set by the market.

Real beauty?

A woman's identity was reduced to contextualized physicality, meaning that judging herself takes place only from the perspective of an outside observer. The campaign billboards, which encouraged viewers to vote online about the appearance of the women featured on them, in a way gave recipients permission to act as judges of their appearance. Women can only be beautiful when others perceive them as such (here, when they vote), which destroys the psychological principle of self-acceptance of one's own body. Besides, only women were judged, which in turn may suggest that men are in a sense privileged, they do not have to be subjected to such judgments or simply do not have problems with their appearance.

Billboards usually showed a face or a half-silhouette. Women in dynamic poses, facing the lens, were supposed to evoke in the viewer a specific impression of openness, satisfaction (with themselves or with Dove cosmetics?). They are subject to Bourdieu's "principle of display", being a body for someone else, or existing just for the gaze.

Beauty is diverse, but it must manifest itself in female body. In this way, the campaign deepens the stereotypical perception of women, narrowed down to their physical appearance and its exaggerated role in human life. The female carnality in this context becomes objectified, an object that is constantly evaluated and put on display. The integrity of carnality and inner experience - so emphasized by psychologists - must be thus disturbed. The media images promoting a brand detach one from the other in order to include the product in the construction of the self-image - only the product makes this integration possible. The 'beauty - woman' relation is mediated by the 'woman - commodity - beauty' trio. Thus, the link which the consumers have direct contact with is not the beauty they are supposed to experience, but the cosmetic. What is "significant" and what is

"signified" here?, a semiologist would ask. The Dove brand appeals to authentic and diverse female beauty, or, if this association could be ingrained in the minds of consumers, beauty would be as authentic and diverse as the Dove brand. The product would become the signifier, and it is probably this exchange of the "signifier" and the "signified" that the creators of this campaign have in mind. Although the campaign encourages building self-acceptance, it does not point to personal relationships but to products as the means to achieve it. By the same token, it is an example of "commodity fetishism," which concerns the deceptive view that material objects bring long-term satisfaction.

The body in this promotional discourse cannot be natural at all; it cannot be fully accepted, it must be improved – i.e. moisturized, nurtured, protected from improper odour, renewed, etc. In this discourse, beauty becomes an unconditional imperative. It ceases to be something natural, a result of nature's efforts or a complement to moral qualities. It becomes a fundamental and indispensable quality – the only asset of a woman. Why don't the authors of the campaign encourage women to take actions that would allow them to expose their intelligence, wit, sensitivity or ethical attitudes?

The campaign has been hailed as "a great revolution in the perception of a female body". However, the field of influence (corporeality) was not abandoned here, but only found a rather perverse way to hide the persuasive presence of the commercial message. In an attempt to (effectively) differentiate itself from the competition, Dove's campaign messages are no different from the ideology reinforced by other cosmetic companies. Perhaps the campaign draws attention to slightly different standards of "beauty," but it does not have the effect of alleviating some women's obsession with their own appearance; on the contrary, it continues to make the body the main tool for shaping self-esteem.

Varied beauty?

The creators of Dove brand communication wanted to depart from the canon presented by the media, but reproduced it instead. Women are exposed, and their bodies are evaluated. The need to change stereotypes was declared, and so "non-models" were employed in the campaign. Unlike in other commercial discourses, beauty was to be diverse. The "non-models", however, have certain features in common: each of them has a pretty face, white even teeth, smooth skin (even though with moles), shiny, thick, well-groomed hair. It turned out that the casting criteria were narrowed down as the search proceeded. The women were supposed to have shapely figures, nice legs, arms and faces; their bodies could not have any tattoos or scars. Thus, those who did not meet certain requirements were crossed off the list of "real women". What is more, a computer graphic designer, who worked on the campaign, admitted that he made numerous corrections to the photos promoting "real beauty".

The notion of beauty in this discourse turns out to be restrictive. It clearly marks the border between better and worse images of women. In the "Real Beauty Sketches" campaign, the sketches that were created on the basis of the portrayed women's own descriptions and had definitely more e.g. wrinkles, dark circles under their eyes, were unanimously considered "worse" and "uglier" than the ones created on the basis of descriptions made by outsiders. What then, if a person actually looks like the portrait made on the basis of their own (inferior) description? Should she be considered "uglier" and "less attractive"? Besides, when women judged their two different portraits in terms of which one resembled them more, they used terms such as "she looks younger", "she is slimmer" – all this promotes the notion of "beauty" associated with youth or just with a slim figure. This undermines the sense of the main campaign messages.

The "Dove vote ads" encouraged viewers to take part in voting on the appearance of women depicted on billboards. Each time they were given a choice of two features, for instance, with the older model these were: "wrinkled" or "gorgeous", and for the one with full curves: "fat" or "fit". The choice was limited to two options only – from these two, one had to be selected, thus excluding the other. Consequently, if the option of a gorgeous woman was selected, it was simultaneously admitted that she could not have any wrinkles; if the feature "suitable" was indicated, it was immediately excluded that she could be "fat". Advertising clearly itemised the features that beauty should not be associated with: old age (grey hair, wrinkles), obesity. A socially acceptable and unacceptable image was created, the world was presented in two dimensions only, and women had to be placed there. So where is this declared promotion of the diversity of female beauty?

Social action?

The campaign, although not directly encouraging people to buy Dove products, with its *pull* communication approach cutting off overt persuasion, was an example of an aggressive marketing strategy. It attacked the competition and positioned its brand as a "liberator", an ally of women in their fight against the pressure of the cosmetics industry. Pointing out the social harmfulness of the competitor's messages led to gaining wide sympathy for one's own undertakings, popularized as "different" and ethical because implemented for the benefit of women. This sounded rather paradoxical, especially when mothers were urged to talk to their daughters "before the cosmetics companies do." When read literally, it was a call not to believe the Dove brand communication, either.

The campaign was not so much about "broadening the definition of beauty", but more about the target group. Communication about the brand's social involvement was addressed to young girls, often worried about their physicality, as well as those whose age and figure somehow excluded them from the group of women who have a chance to meet the contemporary requirements. The proper message of this campaign was thus: "If you are neither slim nor young or you

don't feel as beautiful as you'd like to – buy a Dove product." The beauty pattern presented by the creators of this discourse gave women more options than size S. Models were chosen whose bodies were perceived as within reach in order to make it easier for women to identify with them.

The strategy proved to be extremely effective. The Dove brand perception research showed that the brand is considered trustworthy, "friendly", "sincere" and its advertisements reflect the "real" performance of the products [9]. CSR has brought the Dove brand back to prominence in the cosmetic products market. Only one-fifth of the value of budgets allocated for such purposes was spent on launching and promoting the lotion, generating a 2.3 percent market share in six months and achieving a 24 percent increase in sales during the campaign period [10].

CONCLUSION

The campaign fitted well into the postmodern chaos with its mixing goals, values and meanings in order to make social perception more credible in terms of the pro-social character and "authentic" involvement of the corporation in advancing women's interests. By multiplying messages about the importance of women's appearance in their lives, they exploited girlish immaturity and female insecurity. Appealing to theses that sound like life truths, weakened consumers' alertness to the contradictory, often paradoxical meanings of this campaign. Under the slogans of a necessity to create a community opposing the sexist imagery of naked and skinny women, skin-"renewing" cosmetics were sold successfully, thanks to which a woman would gain the acceptance of others, even if she is slightly overweight. By positioning the brand as a "tool" of resistance to contemporary "beauty standards" beyond your reach, no real support was offered in Dove's promotional communication. The help that focussed on 'beauty' (again) could not alleviate women's anxieties; on the contrary, by making the body the main tool for building self-esteem, it could only intensify them.

Declarations of responsibility, formulated in well-sounding documents, prepared by management, will be difficult to enforce at lower levels of the organisation, if they are not based on new competencies, skills and do not provide for the development of principles to enforce this responsibility. The most important challenge for CSR, therefore, is to bring it into the mainstream of management, at all levels, i.e. to include it in the development of strategy, in the instruments of implementation, in the measurement of results and in the selection of key directions of development. Effective CSR must be integrated with organisational systems, processes and structures (*hardware*), as well as corporate culture (*software*).

On the other hand, the majority of corporate charity initiatives seem like socially responsible marketing campaigns – easy to refer to and not related to other aspects of the company's activity. Relations between companies and the

community, based on paternalistic philanthropy, PR or marketing approach, should be replaced by partnership strategies based on the involvement of all stakeholders and investing in progressive markets. It is also a "soft steering" of the state, minimal interventionism, but with a strong involvement of business and consumers in sustainable development.

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