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Quite Like Before: The Power of Emotional Storytelling in Coca-Cola's Campaign *Open Like Never Before*

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Abstract

Few multinational companies worldwide can claim to be able to equal the communicative power of Coca-Cola: every advertising and marketing device conceived by the drinks company is a masterpiece of brand image construction and promotion, and of course of corporate storytelling. One of the purposes of corporate storytelling is indeed to build consumer loyalty through brand reputation in order to implicitly reinforce people's opinions about corporate values; considering sustainability, for example, many companies are now including environmental concerns in their promotional strategies.
Coca-Cola's most recent advertising campaign, Open Like Never Before, provides an excellent yet controversial example of emotional storytelling. This paper aims to observe the characteristics of Coca Cola's strategies from the theoretical/methodological frameworks of multimodal critical discourse analysis and ecolinguistics – the "ecological analysis of discourse" (Alexander/Stibbe 2014: 104). Drawing also from other disciplines such as social semiotics, and from theories of emotional capitalism, the present study considers both verbal and visual elements to the purpose of deconstructing the sophisticated storytelling techniques employed by Coca-Cola in the Open Like Never Before advertisement. By examining corporate reports and communications via official website and social media, the company's actual commitment to change and sustainability will also be examined so as to yield further relevant information. Ultimately, the discrepancies between the core message of positive change and the negative performances of sustainability reported by the company will be outlined, thus vouching for a multitude of intertwining research perspectives.

Keywords

multimodal critical discourse analysis, ecolinguistics, corporate storytelling, corporate social responsibility

1. Introduction

In the current era, the creative possibilities and communicative means available for corporate advertising are basically limitless. The ubiquitous modalities offered by social media platforms, as well as the still unexplored boundaries of interactivity, create a hybrid, plastic space where time and space constraints are loose, and customers can be reached anywhere, anytime. Most importantly, as corporate storytelling becomes more and more sophisticated, the influence of brand promotion on consumers' choices and behaviours can now

become as powerful as ever. Among the most successful examples of corporate storytelling, the case of Coca-Cola stands out. The American multinational corporation – established in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1886 – boasts 125 years of advertising and, today, it continues to mark the history of corporate marketing. A booklet on the company's advertising history reads: "[…] Coca-Cola is among the most-admired and best-known trademarks in the world. In fact, a *Bloomberg* article from 2005 claims that 'Coca-Cola' is the second-most widely understood term in the world, after 'okay'" (McKee 2005; see also The Coca-Cola Company 2021: 5). Over the decades, Coca-Cola has contributed to shape popular culture and taste, especially in Western countries, through its brand and product promotion: suffice it to say that the modern representation of Santa Claus – a "pleasantly plump character with a jolly expression and a white beard, wearing a red suit" (The Coca-Cola Company 2021: 13) – appeared in Coca-Cola's illustrations as early as 1931 and until 1964 as part of a specific marketing strategy. Furthermore, Coca-Cola's advertisements, with memorable songs, jingles, and slogans, have always been a source for popular cultural references.

Undoubtedly, the drinks giant has been at the centre of extensive research in a variety of disciplines, from marketing (Gummesson 2002; McCole 2004; Foster 2007) to advertising and communication studies (Cook 1992; Balmer/Gray 1999; Taylor 2012), to mention but a few. In the field of discourse analysis, studies on Coca-Cola's advertising have focused, among other topics, on the language-power relationship and the construction of interpersonal meaning (Asghar 2014; Li 2016), and on the use of emotional language and branding (Wu/Li 2018; Bhatia 2019). Similar studies have explored the innovative elements in the advertising language used by Coca-Cola (Benard *et al.* 2015), and the power of advertising as a site of language contact (Piller 2003). More recently, some controversial aspects – such as the company's sustainability performances – have opened to other possibilities for interdisciplinary research, especially on corporate storytelling and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (see e.g. Bondi 2016).

Telling stories is a natural, fundamental human need, and it is common "to all nations, societies and cultures […] since time immemorial", according to Gill's literature review of corporate storytelling (2011: 3). The advertising practice has long relied on storytelling to build effective corporate communications aimed at selling all kinds of goods and services. However, it is only recently that emotional storytelling, or the ability to target emotional responses through stories, has become such a prominent feature of brand promotion. Speaking of corporate storytelling, it seems appropriate to introduce the notion of 'emotional capitalism' as defined by Eva Illouz (2007: 5). This general definition applies to:

> […] a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life […] follows the logic of economic relations and exchange.

This concept lies at the heart of advertising as a marketing practice. In corporate storytelling, emotion is considered as "the inner energy that propels us toward an act, what gives a particular 'mood' or 'coloration' to an act" (Illouz 2007: 3). Emotional storytelling has, therefore, proven an effective promotional strategy because it affects potential customers on a cognitive and emotional level, shaping their tastes and needs, and motivating their buying choices on a much more personal level. Due to the continuous, pervasive exposure to advertising, receivers/consumers have become skilled interpreters of advertisements. Therefore, today, the explicit promotion of products is not as effective as a few decades ago, but entertainment and emotion appear to be the key to successful advertising. Over the years, advertisers have gradually concealed their selling intentions in increasingly clever ways, for example by focusing on memorable messages rather than products (Federici 2018). Consequently, emotional storytelling has become an integral part of most companies' marketing strategy, opening not only to a new area of professional expertise, but also to more careful planning of corporate communication in general. In this sense, Coca-Cola has been a pioneer of emotional branding and storytelling. At the beginning of its record-breaking history, Coca-Cola's signature script logo made the company recognisable on newspapers, magazines, and billboards. Later on, other advertising intuitions contributed to the creation of Coca-Cola's unique image: the already-mentioned representation of Santa Claus, the original television commercials, or the sponsorships at international sports events are just a few examples (The Coca-Cola Company 2021). The famous television spot *Hilltop*, aired in 1971, and featuring the hit song *I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke*, remains one of the most successful case studies among Coca-Cola's advertising campaigns (Taylor 2012; Li 2016; see also The Coca-Cola Company 2021).

In the fields of marketing and advertising, the COVID-19 pandemic has obviously opened a new era with still unknown emotional implications for all corporate communication. As "one of the most significant environmental changes in the modern marketing history", its effects are likely to have "a profound impact on corporate social responsivity, consumer ethics, and basic marketing philosophy" (He/Harris 2020: 176). The persistency of the pandemic has required businesses to reconsider their CSR practices, and perhaps to accelerate their implementation in the short and medium term. It has been noted that consumers, especially younger ones, expect businesses to offer engagement and support in these difficult times, and that they will be better addressed if business response regarding CSR and ethics is perceived as being adequate and genuine (see Faw 2020; Taylor 2020). Coca-Cola's reaction in this sense is once again exemplary. The campaign *Open like Never Before* (*OLNB*) was distributed for the UK and the European market starting from August 2020. It features a video and a poem written and performed by London-born artist, George 'The Poet' Mpanga, sending a message of hope and solidarity to the world in the difficult times of COVID-19. The Coca-Cola Company (2020a) explained the meaning and the message of the campaign on its corporate website:

> The COVID-19 pandemic has created a 'new normal'. But just because, for now at least, life isn't what it previously was, doesn't mean there aren't new possibilities and opportunities to be explored.
> This is the message of Coca-Cola's new campaign, *Open Like Never Before*, which is encouraging all people to live those exact words, be 'open, like never before', think differently, embrace change, and better appreciate what was perhaps previously taken for granted.

The campaign is part of a global support programme launched by Coca-Cola and addressed to small, local businesses in the hospitality sector; since August 2020, the initiative has provided "venues with media budget and advertising space donated by Coca-Cola to host their advert as a way to communicate that they are once again open for business" (The Coca-Cola Company 2020a). The idea is remarkable in terms of brand-image building and meta-advertising, since it doubles the already global visibility of the company (The Coca-Cola Company 2020b). From the point of view of emotional storytelling, the video of *OLNB* creates and delivers a message of positive change inspired by Coca-Cola.

As regards CSR, the company's reported business practices concerning pollution rates and commitment to change are somehow different from those advertised in media; indeed, according to the results of the 2020 brand audit of plastic waste by the global movement Break Free from Plastic, Coca-Cola emerges as the "#1 Top Global Polluter" (Break Free from Plastic 2020) for the third consecutive year. Such insight offers another point of reflection on the power of corporate storytelling and advertising to manipulate information.

This study places itself in the wake of the above-mentioned research perspectives; in particular, multimodal critical discourse analysis and ecolinguistics provide the theoretical and methodological framework to investigate the storytelling strategy behind Coca-Cola's recent advertising campaign *Open Like Never Before* (August 2020). Verbal, visual, and metaphoric elements in the video are analysed so as to observe how the idea of 'change' is communicated through this multimodal text. Further on in the study, an ecocritical approach is adopted as the starting point for considerations on Coca-Cola's actual commitment to sustainability as a core value. To this purpose, the company's *2019 Business & Sustainability Report* is considered as a source of reliable figures and data on CSR issues. Ultimately, the aim of the present paper is to offer a comparison between the message of innovation communicated in the advertising campaign, and the company's engagement with environmentally-friendly business practices.

2. Methodology

2.1. Multimodal critical discourse analysis

Within the broad field of discourse analysis, the attributes 'multimodal' and 'critical' define the methodological aspects to be considered in this research study. Regarding the first aspect, it is perhaps useful to

interpret the multi-modality of certain texts as if decoding a "grammar of other semiotic modes", as van Leeuwen (2005: 3) put it. In his seminal work on social semiotics, the Dutch linguist resumes Halliday's notion of grammar as "a resource for making meanings" (Halliday 1978: 192), and applies it to other semiotic modes or 'resources'. Social semiotics starts from the assumption that "linguistic signifiers – words and sentences – have a signifying potential rather than specific meanings" (van Leeuwen 2005: 5); similarly, all semiotic resources – "the actions and artefacts we use to communicate" (van Leeuwen 2005: 3) – have the same meaning potential. Once the components of such artifacts (such as audiovisual texts) are identified, it is possible to attribute meaning based on the social context, or "the situation in which meanings are exchanged" (Halliday 1984: 8). For this reason, Section 3.2 of this study introduces considerations about technical and semantic image features. In particular, van Leeuwen's scale for sensory modality (2005: 170) is adopted to observe how the degree of abstractness-naturalness in image representation affects sensory and emotional perception. Other considerations make reference to Machin and Mayr's study of image composition, colour, and shots (2012).

It is clear why advertising – as a means to influence people/consumers and drive their behaviour through its many semiotic modes – is a central topic in discourse analysis. Based on the above observations, it is possible to state that, in advertising, discourses and social practices are in a mutual, yet unbalanced, relationship. In particular, advertising constitutes a space for building corporate-driven discourses in which meaning needs ultimately to be persuasive. Because of this purpose, advertising has faced frequent criticism; it has been noted that the "hidden agenda behind advertising discourse introduces a financial element in [the] communication process that taints it" (Freitas 2010: 260). Furthermore, the 'ideas and attitudes' attached to each discourse in a given context add further elements of analysis: evaluation, purpose, and legitimation thus become theoretical criteria for discourse investigation. Going back to multimodality, three main elements characterise advertising as a privileged genre: content, form, and function.

This latter component, in particular, serves as a link to introduce the 'critical' standpoint in discourse analysis. Again, van Leeuwen (2005: 123) clarifies that "[t]he genre of advertisement is defined by its function of selling products or services – and, today, increasingly, ideas". In advertising, ideas are transferred through a variety of 'modalities', all cooperating to the creation of functional representations; in this case, the adjective 'functional' stands for the specific communicative and marketing objectives implied. This is precisely:

> [...] the social semiotic approach to the question of truth. It relates both to issues of representation – fact versus fiction, reality versus fantasy, real versus artificial, authentic versus fake – and to questions of social interaction, because the question of truth is also a social question – what is regarded as true in one social context is not necessarily regarded as true in others, with all the consequences that brings. Linguists and semioticians therefore do not ask 'How true is this?' but '*As how true* is it represented?' They are concerned not with

> the absolute truth but with the truth as speakers and writers and other sign producers see it, and with the semiotic resources they use to express it (van Leeuwen 2005: 160, emphasis in the original).

Following this perspective, all adverts can be seen as biased, partial (re)presentations of individual truths, shaping the response of people/consumers through emotions, and leading them to industry-driven choices. More specifically, such choices are not limited to commodity goods and services, but also include social behaviours, with consequences on social values and practices in general. The ideological and emotional power of advertising and corporate storytelling to influence people is at the centre of critical approaches to corporate discourse analysis. Because consumers "have fallen into the ad-induced habit of identifying what should merely be a factual (and real) commodity with unreal emotions" (Freitas 2012: 428), one of the purposes of CDA in the field of advertising is indeed to bring to light those dynamics supporting and building discourses. As highlighted by Fairclough *et al.* (2011: 358), "[w]hat is distinctive about CDA compared with other approaches to research is that without compromising its social scientific objectivity and rigour, it openly and explicitly positions itself on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups". Indeed, critical discourse analysis can be used to investigate the mechanisms of corporate storytelling – including language and multimodal devices – in order to describe (and question) its effects on specific consumers' behaviour. In this study, we have chosen to observe, among other components, the verbal and visual elements employed to construct emotional storytelling in Coca-Cola's advertising video *OLNB*; other observations, such as those on the campaign implied message, are offered to assess how much the company's sustainability values and practices adhere to the advertisement message of positive change.

2.2. Ecolinguistics

Among its many applications, ecolinguistics can provide further supporting ground to the practical task of discourse analysis. As described by the eminent ecolinguists Richard Alexander and Arran Stibbe, this research approach implies performing an "ecological analysis of discourse" (2014: 104) to the purpose of uncovering more or less explicit elements of language in a given topic or discourse. A vast part of the existing literature in ecolinguistics is indeed devoted to observe the specific linguistic choices that contribute to "constructing or, at the least, shaping a viewpoint on, ecological issues" (Alexander/Stibbe 2014: 106), as well as to assessing the impact of those choices on human behaviour. More specifically, ecolinguistic investigation focuses on examining those "clusters of linguistic features" building "models or shaping devices [which] enable humans to construct relationships with the real world" (Alexander/Stibbe 2014: 105). In line with a functional and systemic view of language, one of the assumptions of ecolinguistics is that both language systems and discourse communities are part of the complex social organisation

systems of human beings. Consequently, the theoretical and ideological standpoint of ecolonguistics finds practical application through the investigation methods of critical discourse analysis.

The research standpoint offered by this discipline is not unrelated to the above-mentioned concept of 'social semiotics'. This sub-field of semiotics concerns "the nature of the relationship among semiotic materials, power, and ideology. Power is seen as transmitted and practiced through the choices of semiotic materials" (Chen/Eriksson 2019: 2). Already in the 1970s, Halliday (1978: 198) analysed semantic systems, noticing how these "are significant for the ways their speakers interact with one another"; furthermore, he suggested that the semiotic diversity of languages shapes and influences the perceptions of certain issues by speech communities. In a certain way, Halliday anticipated the methodology of ecolinguistics by looking at those aspects of language, such as grammar, which "conspire [...] to construe reality in a certain way [...] that is no longer good for our health as a species" (Halliday 1990: 25). Of course, this perspective adds to other 'critical' interpretations of discourse, including those aiming to highlight political, ethical, or social issues. Following this approach, it is possible to consider many fields of discourse as material spaces where relationships of power/oppression unfold.

Such notions also apply to the field of corporate storytelling and advertising. Speaking about stories, Stibbe (2015: 10) considers the relation, for ecolinguistic purposes, between stories as "mental model[s] within the mind of an individual person" and the "cognitive structures which influence how multiple people think, talk and act":

> A story of 'progress' for example, may consider the past negatively as a brute struggle for survival, the present as a great improvement due to technological innovation, the future as even more promising, and further industrialisation and technological innovation as what we should aim for. Each person will have their own collection of stories in their minds, but some stories, like that of progress, are shared by large numbers of people. They do not just exist in individual people's minds, but across the larger culture in what van Dijk refers to as *social cognition* (Stibbe 2015: 10, emphasis in the original).

The suggested relationship between individuals and communities, as well the notion of shared culture, are pivotal in advertising. It seems that advertising configures as a natural tool for the construction of sometimes cunning realities for the collective imaginary: the advertiser holds the communicative power and chooses the ideological message to be transferred to the audience. Already in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan (1964) anticipated that the product would lose relevance, and that audience participation would be at the centre; as previously observed, many advertising campaigns are now focused on creating entire narrative worlds for the consumers, rather than showing appealing products. The role of corporate storytelling is exactly to make sure that consumers enter those worlds, play with them, and forget about the products they are being sold. This idea is also central in other postmodern discourses. Current theories in material ecocriticism, for instance, question the linguistic/ontological

dichotomy between animate and inanimate matter, and claim that all matter is "agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings" (Iovino/Oppermann 2012: 79); such assumption can be the starting point to envision some of our commodity goods as "weirdly malevolent" (Alaimo 2014: 19) because of their polluting nature. In the case of Coca-Cola, the storytelling strategy is so effective at creating a positive image that the plastic bottles produced and sold every year are basically neglected. As a matter of fact, the promotion of Coca-Cola is still largely based on the iconic glass Contour Bottle created in 1915 to be "so distinctive that it could be recognized by feel in the dark or identified lying broken on the ground" (The Coca-Cola Company 2021: 15). The glass bottle is also advertised in the *OLNB* campaign, thus providing another element to be analysed in an eco-critical perspective.

Finally, it seems worth mentioning the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on advertising design and distribution. Since 2020, many countries worldwide have experienced the positive consequences of a reduced circulation of people: after national lockdowns, the general quality of the environment – including levels of water and air pollution – has improved, sometimes significantly, in cities and urban areas (Venter *et al.* 2020). As a consequence, recent indications by international institutions and bodies (European Commission 2020) recommend that national recovery plans should be strongly based on environmentally-friendly policies. In the EU area, for example, the European Green Deal offers a framework for the future of sustainable economies (Simon 2020). In line with these principles, more and more advertisers are now stressing topics such as pollution and climate change in their campaigns, as well as the invitation for consumers to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle.[1] Such issues provide interesting material for all linguistic and discourse analyses performed from an eco-critical standpoint.

3. Analysis

The following analysis takes into account verbal and visual elements, as well as metaphors from the *Open Like Never Before* advertising campaign. In particular, the text of the homonymous poem and the images from the featured video are examined with the tools of multimodal CDA so as to deconstruct the emotional storytelling techniques of Coca-Cola. Verbal elements, in particular, are also observed from an eco-critical linguistic perspective. At the end of this section, information retrieved from Coca-Cola's *2019 Business & Sustainability Report* provides further discussion material on the company's environmental ethics.

The full-length video of *Open Like Never Before* is 2.11 minutes long. It features a poem with the same title, written specifically for the campaign by George 'The Poet' Mpanga – an acclaimed London-born spoken word performer of Ugandan heritage. A transcription of the full poem is available on The Coca-Cola Company website (2020b). As previously mentioned, the aim of the campaign was to deliver a message of hope in the present times of deep change. According to

[1] Some examples can be seen in: Ferrarelle 2019; Adidas Originals 2021; Levi's 2021.

Coca-Cola Great Britain, this campaign "comes following our seven month pause in commercial advertising – the longest ever for Coca-Cola – which saw us instead use our resources to support COVID-19 relief efforts around the world, and donate our advertising space, including the famous Piccadilly Sign, to charity partners [...] to promote their fundraising messages" (The Coca-Cola Company 2020a). The general mood of the video is highly inspirational; the soundtrack – *San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)* by Emile Mosseri featuring Daniel Herskedal, Joe Talbot, and Michael Marshall – also contributes to create an energetic atmosphere. While music will not be taken into account in the following analysis, it should be underlined that it functions as a central element for multimodality. Like all semiotic modes, it is in fact a powerful carrier of communicative acts; all musical choices in advertising influence the perception and reception of messages delivered in a multimodal way. As suggested by Kress and van Leuween (1996: 122), "rising melodies can be used to energize people, to rally people together for a common cause, for instance in national anthems and patriotic songs, or in upbeat advertising songs". The so-called 'sound acts' – the result of a combination of several melodic features, including tempo, rhythm, and of course voices – are a fundamental component of the proposed case study. In *OLNB*, most sound acts involve and are produced by George 'The Poet' himself, who appears as the narrator and main character of the video. Given the purposes and the methodological framework of this study, only the verbal and the visual elements of the video will be considered.

3.1. Verbal elements

The poem *Open Like Never Before* has 41 lines in its full version, albeit 4 lines are left out in the video. The poem does not follow a specific pattern or metric scheme, but it may be divided into 9 stanzas, based on the recurrent literary devices used. From a thematic and structural point of view, the poem starts with a reflection on the present moment, questioning the assumed 'normality' of old times, and challenging the hearer/viewer to embrace change. The central part explores the many possibilities of the "new normal" (The Coca-Cola Company 2020b), with aspirations and resolutions for the present; the final part is a declaration of hope and desires for the future, ending in the closing line "So I'll be open/ Like never before" (The Coca-Cola Company 2020b). The first and the last stanzas are indeed emotionally stronger, compared to the rest of the text. The first one reads:

> Wait, stop.
> Who said we have to go back to normal, back to anything?
> What if the new normal ain't the normal we knew?
> And we can't just do what we'd formerly do.
> What if the big change is you and me
> What if we choose to be open?
> And say...

The word 'normal' appears three times, so as to underline the main objective of the poem, that is, establishing a different and yet familiar

reality; similarly, the anaphora 'what if' is used to build the theme of unexplored possibilities. As observed by Gill (2011: 3) paraphrasing Simmons (2006), "[i]t is believed people receiving the narration often come to the same conclusion as the narrator, but through using their own decision-making processes". In this sense, all subsequent stanzas reinforce the ideological purpose of the campaign. The word 'change' – in opposition to 'what we'd formerly do' – is traditionally a carrier of positive emotions linked to the future.

In a recent press statement, Walter Susini, Coca-Cola's senior vice-president of marketing in the EMEA area, said that "[b]eing open is fundamentally a point about attitude and the importance of empathy today more than ever" (Rogers 2020). Such affirmations can fuel environmental criticism, as they suggest that Coca-Cola is more interested in showing an attitude or a philosophy of openness, rather than producing a real change. Moreover, it appears that the envisioned change is only addressed to the audience/consumers, imagined as a generic and romanticised 'you and me', and not towards the company itself. The correct attribution of responsibility is indeed a long-standing issue in all discourses about waste production and management. While environmental organisations agree that corporations should be held accountable for the amount of (single-use plastic) waste produced – and likely to be discarded in the environment (Tukker 2020) –, Coca-Cola seems to be reluctant to concede that the biggest change should come from manufacturers. Speaking at the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos, Bea Perez (Coca-Cola's senior vice president and communications and sustainability officer) admitted that the company should be part of the solution. Nevertheless, she added that Coca-Cola cannot eliminate plastic altogether because many consumers still prefer to buy plastic bottles: "[b]usiness won't be in business if we don't accommodate consumers" (Thomas 2020; Bandoim 2020). In general, while Coca-Cola has adopted the invitation to 'change' as a CSR value; however, the word is here mainly intended as an emotional appeal addressed to consumers.

Further on, the poem introduces the topic of life and work during the COVID-19 pandemic: the line "What if I don't wait for another crisis to embrace the love that I've missed?" is emblematic. From an eco-critical standpoint, the word 'crisis' is frequently used in collocation with 'plastic'; many environmental NGOs present the plastic pollution problem as a 'plastic crisis' in order to underline the urgency of the matter. The word 'crisis' also appears in a recent report by the United Nations inviting to "learn from this crisis and build back better"; in the report, the current situation has a strong link with some environmental topics: "[h]ad we been further advanced in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, we could better face this challenge – with [...] a healthier natural environment, and more resilient societies" (UN 2020: 2). The call to action from the UN is transformed into a useful storytelling device. Other lines in the poem highlight this concept. The closing stanza reads: "I'll never forget how much stronger we are together/ I'll carry that in my heart forever". From the point of view of CSR, the pandemic has provided companies with an opportunity for self-

analysis, as acknowledged by He and Harris: "[t]he pandemic will teach us a lesson that 'we are all in this together', which undoubtedly will raise people's expectation of businesses being more socially responsible" (2020: 177).

The post-pandemic era is evoked in numerous other lines. In the couple "And I'll learn my lesson from a bad memory/ And I'll keep social distance from bad energy", the negative adjective 'bad' is to be read in opposition to a new, positive attitude for the future. While the image of a 'bad memory' to be forgotten has often been associated with the global pandemic, this device is also part of a marketing strategy aiming at reinforcing positive brand image. In general, all grammar choices in the text contribute to building positivity and human agency, as exemplified by the numerous 'I will never' and 'what if' phrases in the poem. Machin and Mayr (2012), among others, suggest that the massive use of active voices (transitivity) and modal verbs (modality) are typical features of writing by targeting emotions. Furthermore, the preference for the first-person pronouns 'I' and 'we' aims at establishing an inclusive relationship between the advertiser and the addressees. The purpose of the advertisement is to represent all the 'actors of change' as equals or peers; for this reason, the pronoun 'you' is less frequent, as it may suggest that the advertiser's voice is "simultaneously […] one of friendship, authority and respect" (Cook 1992: 183), thus marking some distance between the sender and the receivers.

Two lines in particular are worth observing: "I'll stand by every word I say/ I'll make my vote count, make my voice heard today". Not only are such statements expressively strong, but, ironically, they also recall the claims of environmental activists asking to be heard by governments and corporations. The word 'today', as well as the frequent references to the past (as in 'go back to', 'before', or 'formerly') and the future ('what if', or 'I'll') offer another topic for ecolinguistic analysis. Speaking about how grammar and language choices can shape the way we think and act, Chalwa (1991: 262) observed that "the language habits of fragmenting the mass, quantifying intangibles and imaginary nouns, and perceiving time in terms of past, present and future are factors in our inability to perceive the natural environment holistically". More practically, current language habits may also explain the generalised difficulty to perceive certain topics, such as climate change or pollution, as urgent and vital to the human survival: in response to that, more careful reflection would be needed from media,[2] institutions, and companies.

Several metaphors are used in the poem with the purpose of enhancing the emotional strength of the message. In storytelling, meaning – "the way people make sense of situations they encounter in their daily lives" (Gill 2011: 3) – is always constructed "through reflection on experience", that is, by relating to the situation displayed. The role of words and metaphors in emotion building is relevant because they add "a personal component of understanding and connection" (Hansen 2008: 42), which makes the communication much more effective. In *OLNB*, the lines "What if I don't wait […] to embrace the love that I've missed?", "What if my dreams never take

[2] In recent years, *The Guardian* has updated its style guide by introducing, or replacing, certain terms to better describe the environmental emergency; the expression 'climate change', for instance, has been substituted with "climate emergency, crisis, or breakdown" (see Carrington 2019).

the backseat again", and "What if I refuse to be a stranger in my own living room" relate directly to feelings of emotional compensation for lost or forgotten needs and ambitions. In line with Lakoff and Johnson's paradigm of metaphor theory (1980), emotions are always portrayed as physical forces; similarly, physical senses are evoked in subsequent metaphors: "My ears are not my earphones", "I might give in to the rhythm soon". Analysing monomodal and multimodal metaphors, Forceville (2014: 59) noticed how advertising plays with metaphor multimodality to obtain different communicative effects. In the *OLNB* video, metaphors are verbally and visually coherent, as featured images accompany the poem's text. This is a clever storytelling strategy managing to conceal the metaphor's primary subject, that is, the product: by letting viewers/consumers infer the positive features of the product for themselves, the emotional response is surely more sincere and less addresser-driven. As it will be shown in the next sub-section, the limited representation of the advertised product responds to a precise visual and communicative choice; all elements, therefore, co-occur to make sure that "advertising is no longer viewed as the manipulative villain", but rather as "the boy next door" (Cortese 2004: 9).

One last metaphor, in particular, is worth-considering from a terminological point of view. In the closing stanza, the line "We'll weather the storm" links the global virus to a violent natural event. The expression is a well-known idiom meaning "to successfully deal with a very difficult problem" (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). Ironically, the verb 'to weather' has also a specialised meaning in the technical fields of chemistry and material science, making reference to the process of degradation that certain materials, such as plastics, have in determined conditions or environments.[3] As a matter of fact, the process of plastic weathering is at the core of many scientific and ecological discourses, pointing out to the still problematic degradation of biodegradable or bio-based plastics in the natural environments.

3.2. Visual elements

The COVID-19 global pandemic has affected the way in which international video communication and advertising is now designed and produced. Due to the impossibility of physical meeting and shooting on sets – and to the reduced advertising expenditure worldwide (Vorhaus 2020) – many advertising videos on social media and television have turned to a new collective, amateur-like way of filming. During 2020, many international adverts – from sportswear companies or food producers, to technology and other types of services[4] – featured collections of short clips, sometimes homemade by non-professional filmmakers, set in private houses, with common people as the protagonists. Such videos show simple, familiar scenes from the new lifestyle of isolation that is forcing everyone to stay at home and to convert all outdoor/out-of-home events into indoor, individual, and non-public activities. The *OLNB* video adopts the same filming techniques, using a well-structured collage of different scenes and characters in a variety of situations. More specifically, the scenes

[3] Some examples can be seen in: Fabiyi *et al.* (2008); Jahnke *et al.* (2017).

[4] Among the other companies, see for example: Ads of Brands 2020; Barilla 2020; Guinness 2020; Uber 2020.

and the subjects represented provide cultural and ethnic diversity so as to communicate inclusiveness and, again, openness. Several ethnicities, genders, and ages are presented: families, couples, groups of friends, parents with their children, and different kinds of workers are portrayed while carrying out daily activities, from cooking or playing, to driving, dancing, or enjoying their homes. Symbolic activities see parents playing with their children, couples living together or getting married, groups of friends spending time together; small but emotionally-powerful gestures, such as smiling or laughing, are constantly emphasised throughout the video.

Figure 3.2.1. Girls dancing in the street
(The Coca-Cola Company 2020a)

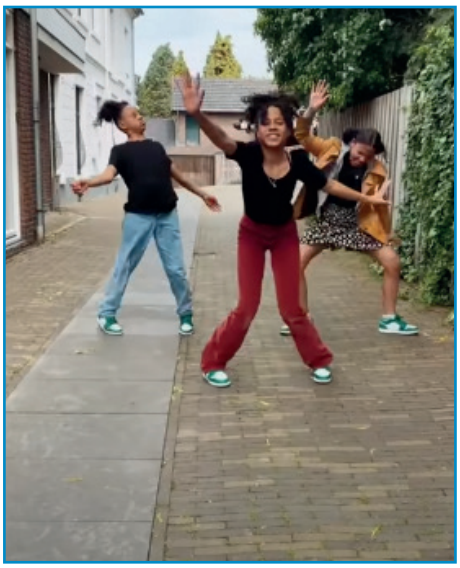


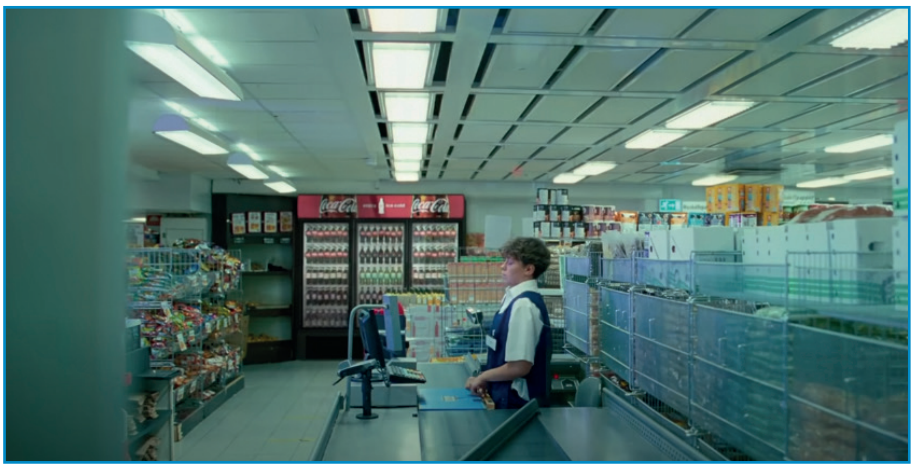
Figure 3.2.2. A father and a child playing together
(The Coca-Cola Company 2020a)

All elements in the visual representation fall within the already mentioned scale for modality degrees (van Leeuwen 2005: 171), with a majority of medium to high naturalness: in general, the images tend more to the 'sensory', with more figurative rather than abstract representations of actions and activities (dancing, listening, smiling),

feelings (happiness, togetherness), and collective ideas (family, love). In this way, the expected emotional response by receivers is more immediate and direct. In general, multimodal cohesion is achieved through the meaningful composition of frames; the integration of the text in the visual space, as well as the rhyming and overlapping of verbal and visual elements reinforce the overall communicative efficacy of the video. Several technical features are used to construct and convey meaning: in line with Machin and Mayr's analysis (2012: 54), salient visuals include bright colours and high-key lighting so as to enhance feelings of optimism and clarity; close and eye-level shots create intimacy and involvement, thus minimising the distance between the viewer and the characters. Both pictorial and visual, as well as gestural metaphors are used to build an imagined post-COVID-19 reality where inside/outside, urban/rural, loneliness/togetherness, proximity/distance are again fluid and possible. Going back to metaphor theory, such renewed reality appears to be the main target of the campaign, while the concept of change is the source, or vehicle, used to conceive it. On the one hand, the envisioned target calls on nostalgic feelings for the past, when such lifestyle was the norm; on the other, it plays with the viewers' desire to experience positive emotions again in the future. More implicitly, change is presented to the consumers as an emotionally-appealing solution that will enable them to move on after the pandemic.

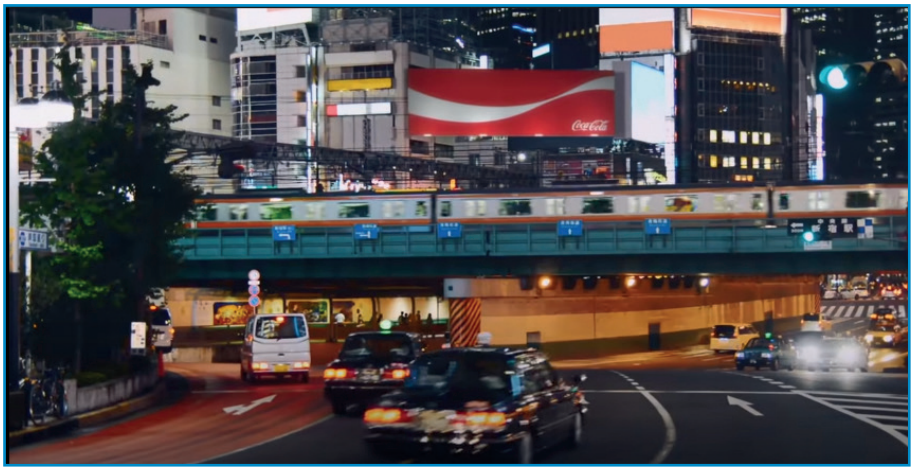
The product Coca-Cola appears only four times in the video: twice peripherally, and twice centrally in the frame. In one of the first scenes, a store clerk stands up from her cashier desk and says into the microphone: "I will never call my job unimportant again"; a Coca-Cola fridge is here visible in the background. Later, some people are filmed while dancing. The lines "And what if I don't dance, but just for you/ I might give in to the rhythm soon" follow a city shot with a Coca-Cola billboard in the background.

Figure 3.2.3. A store clerk. Coca-Cola fridge in the background (The Coca Cola Company 2020a)



In these two sequences, product placement is performed subtly, but effectively, mainly through Coca-Cola's custom red and white colours. In another scene, two neighbouring multi-ethnic families are pulling

Figure 3.2.4. Coca-Cola billboard (The Coca-Cola Company 2020a)



their respective tables closer to the common garden fence, drinking Cokes from their glass bottles; the voice-over lines read "I'll have a family of dozens/ Give my little nephews and nieces some cousins".

Figure 3.2.5. Neighbouring families drinking Cokes
(The Coca-Cola Company 2020a)

The last example sees some girls drinking Coke together, as the powerful line claims "I'll never forget how much stronger we are together". Sociological research has often dealt with the emotional implications of the so-called "language of family" (Ribbens McCarthy 2012), underlining how such representations are loaded with deep universal meaning, and naturally engender desires for togetherness and belonging. *OLNB*'s storytelling is largely based on the visual representation of family, couples, and friends as repositories of positive feelings and emotions.

3.3. Comparison with corporate communications on sustainability

The *OLNB* campaign is an impressive example of advertising expertise, with underlying marketing strategies, storytelling, and communication techniques skilfully combined together. As observed by Gill (2011: 4),

"[c]orporate stories need to have relevance and an appropriate structure to achieve intended objectives, yet remain engaging. The story must stay true to the organisation's identity and brand". In recent years, Coca-Cola has extensively promoted its commitment to sustainability through different channels and events (website, reports, sponsorships, labelling). The corporate webpage dedicated to *Sustainable Business* and *Sustainable Packaging* reads: "The interconnected global challenges of packaging waste and climate change have made this a focus that we are taking a leadership position on. Our company and our bottling partners are taking a hard look at the packaging we use and how we can drive change" (The Coca-Cola Company 2019: 3). The word 'change' is again central in the company's CSR discourse, and this corporate value is translated into factual objectives for the near future. Coca-Cola's *2019 Business & Sustainability Report* places sustainability as one of the top priorities; sustainability goals include designing 100% recyclable packaging by 2025, investing in recycling facilities worldwide, and reducing greenhouse gases emissions by 25% in 4 years, among others (The Coca-Cola Company 2019: 3). Such target, albeit ambitious, can still be perceived as attempts at greenwashing – the "wilful deception of consumers with respect to ecological activities of an organisation or the environmental benefits of a product" (Gräuler/Teuteberg 2014: 2) –, considering that actual data on recycled plastic and sustainability targets are still limited (The Coca-Cola Company 2019). As a matter of fact, a recent report by the Changing Markets Foundation (2020) denounces how Coca Cola and other big plastic polluters have in fact hindered or failed to support progressive legislation on recycling and plastic packaging. The report laments that, among the companies pledging to a voluntary commitment, Coca-Cola set "a goal to start selling soft drinks in bottles made from 25% recycled polyethylene terephthalate (rPET) as far back as 1990 – but, three decades later, their bottles still only contain 10% rPET" (Delemare Tangpuori *et al.* 2020: 7).

The advent of COVID-19 has added another issue for CSR practices, something to which Coca-Cola is willing to respond. The *2019 Business & Sustainability Report* (The Coca-Cola Company 2019: 5) states:

> The coronavirus pandemic has posed enormous challenges around the world. Our company's deepest sympathies go out to all who have been impacted. Even in challenging times, our company's 134-year history shows us one thing: We have faced crises before, and we always emerge stronger, more resilient and more united than ever.

The reference to feelings of sympathy, and the encouragement expressed through the comparative adjectives 'stronger', 'more resilient', and 'more united' are another proof of the company's strong appeal to emotions in its core business, marketing, and advertising practices.

4. Discussion

In light of the above analysis, it appears that both verbal and visual elements in the *OLNB* campaign provide useful information concerning

the broad topics of sustainability and change, as well as material evidence for a multimodal CDA – performed in an ecolinguistic perspective – of emotional corporate storytelling. All elements, or modes, in the *OLNB* video are functionally arranged in order to fulfil the advert's communicative purpose. Going back to Halliday's metafunctions of language (1978), the interpersonal one is especially relevant in Coca-Cola's storytelling to establish and communicate corporate views on given ideas and values. Furthermore, the linguistic and textual choices, as well as the visual features, are carefully conceived so as to become the carriers of emotional meaning – in line with Kress' notion that "language is no longer the carrier of all meaning" (2000: 339). All the observed semiotic modes work simultaneously to make the meaning tangible, visible, and audible. By addressing all sensory perceptions, the meaning is thus multiplied (Li 2016: 934), while the distance from the story in the video is minimised; as viewers are offered intimate images and private spaces, they are no longer mere spectators of the event, but rather active participants in it. The same effort to draw consumers closer to the company is visible in other Coca-Cola's official communications. From the corporate website, to the *2019 Business & Sustainability Report*, the 'language of change' is constantly employed for a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to present and promote the company's engagement with environmental issues; on the other, to reinforce emotional participation and brand loyalty from target consumers.

As it has been underlined, the pandemic is forcing all kinds of companies to rethink and boost their CSR commitment if they are to overcome the extremely delicate period ahead; one of the means to achieve and communicate corporate sustainability goals is indeed advertising. More specifically, emotional storytelling will be the key to reach certain consumers, especially younger ones. A recent study by research firm YPulse (2020) suggests that Gen Z and Millennials expect brands to show their care in the current difficult times by focusing on sharing positive messages, offering mental health support, or promoting donations. In addition, it has been noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is bound to have such profound consequences on business practices in general, that most companies are or will be willing to engage with CSR issues in more proactive and authentic ways (He/Harris 2020: 177).

5. Conclusion

In this study, we have tried to explore the complex relationship between emotional storytelling as used in Coca-Cola's advertising, and sustainability as a CSR issue for the American company. Albeit limited, the evidence and research material provided may be used as a starting point for more detailed studies examining other multimodal elements which were not hereby considered. Further applications sparking from this paper may also investigate the actual perception of Coca-Cola's storytelling strategies by consumers, or the dissemination of CSR values in corporate advertising discourse. Moreover, surveys

measuring the effects of emotional advertising may expand the scope of eco-critical discourse analyses by framing the gap between communicated CSR and real sustainability performances. To this purpose, research on the effectiveness of "various appeal types (e.g. consumer safety, employee welfare, honouring first responders, donations to charity)" (Taylor 2020: 587) could open to numerous interdisciplinary research possibilities.

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