Hidden Language of Advertising: A Semiotic Approach
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Abstract
This article takes semiotic as a practical approach toward the study of advertising. An attempt has been made in this research to investigate the ideology or hidden languages in two 'OMEGA' watch ads which selected from time magazine issued 2002. Advertisers believe that a very crucial way to a successful advertisement is the use of photographic style. It may play a major role in catching the attention of the intended target market such as men, women, adults or teens. "Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interactions" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, p.2). The result of this study will show that semiotic reference occupies a pivotal point in the relationship between advertising discourse and ideology. Images, words, colors, and other signs should be an important part of the overall successfulness of advertisements.

Keywords: Print advertising, Semiotics, Ideology

Introduction
Cook (1992, p.5) states that advertising is a prominent discourse type in virtually all contemporary societies, and we live in a society where it is already well established_ or rapidly gaining ground. The important distinguishing feature of ad discourse is its function, because this is always to persuade people to buy a particular product. But, this is not the only function. According to Durant & Lambrou (2009, p.93), at the same time, advertising conveys information, so that consumers know what is available, who makes it, and where and how they can get it. Williamson (1983, p.19) believes that an advertisement does not create meaning initially but invites us to make a transaction where it is passed from one thing to another. This claim will be supported by Saren et.al. (2007.128), as adverts utilize a preexisting referent system of meaning, because the product, prior to signification in the advert, has no meaning. Goldman (1992, p.2) reads ads socially by identifying advertising as a key institution in "producing and reproducing the material and ideological supremacy of commodity relations". He calls this system 'commodity hegemony'; because, "they reproduce a sense of commodity relations as a natural and inevitable part of the lives of different individuals" (Saren, et.al 2007, p.129). As Williamson (1978) points out, "ads ask us to participate in ideological ways of seeing ourselves and the world". Eagleton (1991, p.9) defines ideology as a matter of 'discourse' rather than 'language'. It concerns the actual uses of language between particular human subjects for the production of specific effects. He believes that you cannot decide whether a statement is ideological or not by inspecting it in isolation from its discursive context. According to him the term 'ideology' is just a convenient way of categorizing under a single heading a whole lot of different things we do with signs. According to Hodge & Kress (1993, p.212) ideological forms are structures of meaning (versions of social relationships) that are inseparable from a set of practices that are themselves kinds of meaning. Ideological analysis of discourse must take full account of the ideologies inscribed in discursive practice. Hence, in order to gain a deep insight of the role that advertising plays in our society, it seems to be necessary to ask how advertising organizes and constructs reality, how ideology and meanings are produced within the ad discourse, and why images are the way they are.

Dyer (1986, p.129) holds that ads as a means of representation and meaning construct ideology within themselves through the intervention of external codes which are located in society. He believes that the ideology of advertisements is so powerful; it is naturalized by the image, the neutral realm of signifier. Ideological powers, as Eagleton (1991, p.195) puts it, is not just a matter of meaning, but of making a meaning stick. In Mythologies, Barthes indicates that photographs can be the material for mythological systems, that is to say, secondary (i.e., complex) semiotic systems (Barthes 1957, pp.199-201), which should be seen as inseparable
wholes and where distinctions among signifier, signified and sign can be drawn only artificially, for analytical purposes (Barthes 1957, p. 197). Saren et.al (2007, p.31) argue that:

The semiotic analysis of ads assumes that the meanings of ads are designed to move out from the page or screen on which they are carried, to shape and lend significance to our experience of reality. We are encouraged to see ourselves, the products or services which are advertised, and aspects of our social worlds, in terms of the mythic meanings which ads draw on and help to promote.

A sign consists of anything which generates meaning. Saussure believes that language is constructed by arbitrary signs, the most important construction in semiotics; hence it is considered as a model. For him, sign is a physical object with meaning consisting of what he termed the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. The signifier is a term for the sign itself; the images as we, the audience, perceive it and the members of the same culture, who share the same language (Fiske 1990, p. 43). But his model suffers from various shortcomings.

Roland Barthes (1961) introduced the word “paradox” in a sense that, the photographic image does convey a meaning, but, since the photograph is (or was in his time) merely analogical in nature and the processes involved in its creation do not transform or encode the reality it depicts, that message is “a message without a code” (Barthes 1961 [1977, p.17]). He emphasized that, the only thing we need to read the message it conveys denotatively is “the knowledge bound up without perception […], an almost anthropological knowledge” (Barthes 1964 [1977, p.36]). Barthes believes that, we should be fully conscious about the ideology around us and the best way is by realizing that all things which are natural by common sense are just mythologies. For him, the denotative status of images is "mythical", while in fact photographic images are naturally connoted and, especially in advertising, are the instruments of intentional processes of signification that are established a priori, therefore encoded in the photograph (Barthes 1964 [1977, p.33]).

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) introduce the existence of a visual code or grammar of visual design. They believe that both visual structures and verbal structures can be used to express meanings drawn from common cultural sources. Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interactions (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, p.2). Hence, Barthes’ paradox is solved through considering the codes embedded in all forms of visual communication which are the forms by Kress and Leeuwen definitions and are, or should be an important part of the critical disciplines.

Print Advertising

Print advertising creates a medium for understanding how advertisers attempt to persuade potential receivers to move to active status. Harris (1986) believes that sometimes, print advertising is mostly visual, a ‘picture’ that is coupled with minimal linguistic material. Sometimes, the visual is almost entirely removed and linguistic material is utilized. Bignell (2002) states that photographs used in print advertisements work as a system of signs that gives form and meaning to consciousness and reality.

According to van Leeuwen (2005, p.8), "A good starting point for studying aspects of visual communication is to consider that there is two verbal and visual modes of communication in print advertising with complex interaction between them". It can be conceived that the linguistic as well as visual choices made by ad producers are not accidental at all. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) can uncover the ideologically-laden choices in this particular genre.
What seems important about signs is that their meaning may only be assessed in relation to their structure and their structural relationships with other signs. A sign not only means in and for itself but also through its place in other signifying systems, for instance the individual ad within advertising. The signified does not exist except as a function of a particular signifying system. The main aim of this research is to reveal the ideological concepts hidden in ads. The sample ad is located within October editions of the popular magazine, namely 'Time'. Thus this essay will individually analyze this advertisements in terms of their status as signs, whose associative meanings not only give a favorable impression of the product, but are also compatible with, and complementary to, the cultural context in which they are situated; thus illustrating this claim that the medium and message may be charged with cultural signification. Bignell (1997, p.78) believes that when scanning the print ads, the qualities that bring it together and set it apart from other media are ones that could be labeled, 'artistic'; the range of color, the sense of sign, intertextuality and the “beauty” of the forms. He states that the magazine is "just a collection of signs". These signs may include paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements such as the title of the magazine, the fonts used, the layout, the colors, the texture of the paper, the language adopted, the content of the articles and so on, and each of these signs have been chosen to generate a meaning.

Color may play a key role in the success of one ad and seems to be the first thing the receivers will notice. Advertisers use color to reflect a specific brand, as well as attempt to communicate a certain mood dictated by the product itself. It shows the 'personality' of a product that's often a lot harder to come up with. Colors and their underlying sociological and historical connotation certainly do produce specific reactions in particular contexts - emotions, associations and even physical effects that can help advertisers in their quest for ever more accurate targeting. Using proper color seems to be the quickest way to create mood without saying a word.

A Semiotic Approach and ideology

The sample used in the detailed critical discourse analysis consists of two ads extracted from 'Time' magazine issued 2002. The rational for choosing 'Time' magazine is that; it is popular mainstream magazine that was extent almost 80 years ago and still is available in most newsagents; and can be seen as part of the global media.

In this study, Ideological concepts will combine with semantic analyzing of these ads to find their interdiscursral features according to what proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996).

A Semiotic Analysis of "OMEGA" watches advertisement (words, Images, and Colors)

In terms of semiotic analysis, an attempt has been made in this article to critically examine the theory proposed by Kress and Leeuwen (1996) for analyzing visual communication. According to Bignell (2002, p.32) the first step in analyzing an advertisement is to note the various signs in the advertisement itself. We can assume that anything which seems to carry a meaning for us in the ad is a sign. So linguistic signs (words) and iconic signs (visual representations) are likely to be found in ads, as well as some other nonrepresentational signs like graphics.

Appendix 1 shows 'OMEGA' watches ad issued in 2002. In this advertisement, advertiser has used larger, capital and bold letters in the headline in order to perhaps draw receiver's attention and make them curious about what this advertisement mainly says and thus may lead the readers to go on reading without any conscious and arouse their curiosity and desire to know more about this product and finally may reach its goal to persuade the readers to buy it. Kress (2010, p.88) points out that meaning can be made through the affordances of font as it can through color. These meanings are socially made, socially agreed and consequently socially and culturally specific.
According to Dyer (1986, p.130), since “denotation is not neutral or untouched by ideology, whatever image is being used some sort of meaning is attached that goes beyond the literal meaning”. On the connoted level because it is not neutral it is set within society - the ad cannot simply “reflect ideology, it reworks it, thus producing new meanings” and “this connotation process depends on our knowledge of the forms of ideology that advertisements employ” (Dyer, 1986 p. 129 -130). The advertiser has been made an attempt to attract their readers by placing one image of watch in the centre of this advertisement. The taglines reinforce this idea as it is placed directly underneath the image in a contrasting black font. At the same time, the advertisement uses smaller-than-headline letters for the subtitle. It seems to make it attractive, eye catching and clear for the readers. The subtitle provides more information about the product. This watch ad invites us to recognize the connotations of the signs in the ad, and to transfer these connotations to the product being advertised.

This watch ad, by placing the photographed famous driver man ‘Michael Schumacher’ above the product actively constructs a relationship between the man and the product. Schumacher was noted throughout his career for his ability to produce fast laps at crucial moments in a race, to push his car to the very limit for sustained periods. Beasley & Danesi (2002) believes that the ads endorse by celebrities to make a product appear reliable. It does this by placing an iconic sign (the photographed man) and a linguistic sign next to each other. "It is this relationship between one sign and another which is important for the meaning of the ad" (Bignell 2002, p.34). Since the relationship involves the sharing of the mythic meanings 'accuracy', 'speed' and 'time' by both the photographed man and the product.

A further point can be made about this ad and that is the way in which color has been used. It is obviously no accident that the product and the photographic image appear to have red color. Walters et al. (1982) found a link between red and felt excitement. This is consistent with the generally accepted view that red is an exciting color (e.g., Guilford and Smith 1959; Tom et al. 1987). This feeling of excitement is pleasant and likely to lead to favorable attitudes. The background is simple, neutral color. Again a connection is being made between the image in the ad and the commodity, watch.

Appendix 2 shows another 'OMEGA' watches ad issued in 2002. A picture of a beautiful female supermodel ‘Cindy Crawford’ in this ad is not simply a sign denoting a particular person who has been photographed. The picture of the supermodel is also a sign which has connotations like Youth, slimness etc. According to Bignell (2002) because the sign has these positive connotations, it can work as thesignifier for the mythic signified 'feminine beauty'. This concept belongs to our society’s stock of positive myths concerning the attributes of sexually desirable woman. The ad has presented us with a sign (the photographed model) which itself signifies a concept 'feminine beauty'. This concept of feminine beauty is what Barthes would describe as a mythic meaning. The mythic meaning of the ad connected the watch, feminine beauty, and exotic sexual pleasure. As in the case of Barthes' black soldier saluting the flag, it doesn't matter who the model is, who the photographer was, where the picture was taken, etc. The only significant attribute of the photographed model is that she exhibits the physical qualities which enable her to function as a signifier for the mythic meaning 'feminine beauty'. Bignell (2002, p.33) believes that the photographic sign has been emptied of its meaning except in as much as it leads the reader of the ad towards comprehending the myth. The connotative meanings are the ingredients of myth, the overall message about the meaning of the product which the ad is constructing by its use of the photographed model.

Watch ads do not literally announce that a watch will make you seem beautiful (this claim would be illegal in many societies anyway). Instead this message is communicated by the structure of signs in the ad, by the way that we are asked to decode the ad’s mythic meanings. The positive connotations of women used as signs derive from the positive connotative in western culture. Bignell (2002, p.34) states that, "ads call on systems of differences which already exist in our culture, and which encode social values". It is easy to see that the ideological
view of feminine beauty is not 'natural' but cultural if we compare the representations of women in western cultures with eastern cultures. In some parts of the world like Muslim countries, the ideological myth of feminine beauty is not always signified by youth, slimness, etc.

Also, in this ad there is a syntagm of linguistic signs, 'Cindy Crawford Choice'. To read this ad, we could identify the connotations of the signs present in it. Seeing how the anchorage between the picture and the text directs us towards the 'correct' reading of the ad. The relay between the watch denoted iconically in the ad and the linguistic sign 'Cindy Crawford Choice' makes it easy to see that this is a special watch product for women. According to Beasley & Danesi (2002, p.17) "the ultimate goal of creating an appropriate image for a product is to embed it into social consciousness". The mythic meanings of the ad as a whole seem to be that the woman, the watch, and the reader, can mean several things at once. The woman, the watch and the reader are not single and fixed identities, but sites where several different coded social meanings in this ad oscillate back and forth. We do not need to decide on a single social meaning for the watch, the woman who wears it in the picture, or for ourselves as readers of the ad or buyer of the watch. The ad invites us to enjoy the unanchoredness of its signs, and the multiplicity of the watch social meanings. This ad addresses women, presenting them with a sign connotating sexual attractiveness and power (the woman wearing the watch). These social meanings, according to the ad can be attained by women if they buy the watch. To buy the watch is perhaps to 'buy into' an ideological myth that women should present themselves as objects for men's sexual gratification in that culture. But according to the notions proposed by Kress & Van Lueween (2009), there are a number of coherent alternative ways of reading the ad, and a number of possible subject-positions from which to understand it. The signs in the ad are too ambiguous, too 'polysemic' (multiple in their meanings) to decide on one 'true' meaning of the ad. These factors, which have to do with the social context of ads and of their readers, make any reading of an ad as a self-contained system of signs with a determinable ideological effect very difficult to justify as 'true' (Bignell, 2002, p.5). Beasley & Danesi (2002, p.31) points out that:

Semiotics ultimately allows us to filter the implicit meanings ad images that swarm and flow through us every day, immunizing us against becoming passive victims of a situation. By understanding the images, the situation is changed, and we become active interpreters of signs.

Conclusion

The major conclusion to be drawn from this study is that, by using signs and colors, the advertisers can better communicate with the consumers and make the product more popular among them in order to achieve the goal of ever-lasting purchase and popularity. There is regularity to be found in advertising phenomena, sets of signs organizing, constraining choice, and these choices are part of social meaning. These sets of signs don't make up a single, comprehensive and coherent meaning, and the meaning of particular signs is always relative to specific kinds of reader, on specific occasions. In terms of this scheme, semiotic analysis occupies an important place within a common framework of critical discourse analysis of advertising. Here, the attention is on signs as a carrier of ideological meanings. What is required is a form of close semiotic description that is at the same time a precise account of the transactions that constitute social meanings. This research is only a step along the way. There is one further, last point. Image, word and color, seen in this way as the product of social practices, are just three of the many semiotic modes through which social meanings of ads are coded. Semiotic reference occupies a pivotal point in the relationship between advertising discourse and ideology. Semiotic analyses like those examined in this paper are perhaps basic building block in constructing ideologies.
References


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Appendix 1. Advertisement of 'OMEGA' watch extracted from 'Time' magazine 2002

World champion Michael Schumacher chooses the Speedmaster Racing.