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SOCIAL-SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO ADVERTISING

Abstract

The objective of this research is to reveal the connotations of verbal and non-verbal signs “hidden” in advertisements. Specifically, this article mainly represents the system of image-text relations applied to different genres of discourse in which images and texts co-occur. Such advertisements combine two kinds of relations – the relative status of images and text and how they relate to each other in terms of social semiotics. The analysis of the advertisement by MacDonald is made based on the theory suggested by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

Keywords: Advertisements, Sign, Image, Text, Kress and van Leeuwen theory

Introduction and theory

According to Halliday (Halliday 1994), there are three major metafunctions of the language-ideational, interpersonal and textual. Similar metafunctions were introduced into the domain of visual social semiotics by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and are referred to as representational, interactive and compositional. According to the authors, “the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve several communicational (and representational) requirements, to function as a full system of communication” (2006: 41). Kress and Van Leeuwen describe signifiers (forms) as vector, modality, gaze, composition, perspective, line and colour. The authors also theorise about how these forms create meanings (signified) when making up signs. As well as this, the compositional meaning of images is realised through three interrelated

systems: information value (given or new, ideal or real, important or less), salience (achieved through size, colour, tone, focus, perspective, overlap, repetition, etc.), and framing.

Multimodal discourse analysis describes how different semiotic modes come together to create a “unified text or communicative event” (Liu 2013). From this standpoint, in multimodal advertisements, texts are expressed both verbally and visually through the text layout, colour designs, and typographical features. As well as this, the authors assume that images and other visual modes are also capable of forming texts, complexes of signs, which reveal internal coherence with each other and external coherence with the context in and for which they were produced. (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006; Lui 2013).

Advertising aims to influence recipients and motivates them to be interested in the offered goods or services or find out more information about the brand. On the other hand, advertising employs sign systems quite significantly. Decoding of these complex message structures is frequently performed through social semiotics (Najafian & Dabaghi (2001) which is generally considered to be interdisciplinary (Braga (2017). Social semiotics may be actively employed when analysing “hidden” messages in media, particularly, in print advertising. The overall pragmatic aim is to make the advertisement more interesting and multilayered and thereby enhance its effectiveness by linking the product to a broad and subtle range of associations encoding in the writer/speaker and decoding in the reader/listener/viewer. The main aim of this research is to reveal the ideological, denotative and connotative concepts hidden in advertisements using the example of the advertisement by MacDonald's.

Methodology

The advertisement below was analysed based on the theory suggested by Kress and Van Leeuwen and described above (2006). According to van Leeuwen (2005, p.8), "A good starting point for studying aspects of visual communication is to consider that there are verbal and

visual modes of communication in print advertising with complex interaction". It can be assumed that both linguistic and visual choices made by advertisement producers are not accidental but pre-thought and pre-planned. What seems important is that the meaning of signs may only be assessed concerning their structure and their relationships with other signs. As is known, the signified always plays a certain role concerning the particular signifying system.



Representational metafunction

Representational metafunction includes narrative and conceptual processes. Narrative patterns are described as dynamic and “present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements,” whereas conceptual patterns are static and “represent participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning”. There are two types of participants in this theory. The first type (represented participants) is represented in images and texts whereas “interactive participants” encode and decode the image/text.

While describing narrative processes, Kress and Leween maintain that the participants may be connected by a vector which is described as a line made up by the components of the image.

More specifically, the actor is the creator of the vector whereas the recipient is referred to as the Goal. The participant who performs the action is called the “Reacter” whereas the recipient of the action is referred to as the ‘Phenomenon’.

Narrative processes are dynamic whereas conceptual processes are static. The authors single out analytical and symbolic subprocesses. The former depicts visual elements from the point of view of part-whole relations, whereas the meaning of a represented participant is given through symbolic processes.

The first metafunction also describes the method of encoding of the topic of the advertisement. The visual encoding is performed by utilizing narrative and/or conceptual structures. (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 59).

In this advertisement, there is only one vector indicated by the baby’s happy smile. The vector actualized is transactional as it is formed by the direction of the glance of the baby (i.e directed towards something outside the picture frame) (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 67-68). The Goal in this advertisement is represented by the burger. Kress and Leeuwen relate participants from the point of view of their class, structure or meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 59). In this case, the classificational process relates the participants to each other and emphasizes the bond between the burger and the baby (i.e Mother and child). Besides, topographical (physical and spatial relations) and topological (logical relations between participants) ties between the participants are also represented through these components. The symbolic meaning of the advertisement emphasizes the bond between the mother and the child, described in terms of the MacDonald's product presented as a mother's breast.

Interactive metafunction

The interactive meaning of images in the advertisement can be realized through three dimensions: image act, social distance and point of view.

The image act involves the gaze direction of the represented participants, which can be directed at the viewer or at some other parts of the image and may be accompanied by certain, significant facial expressions and gestures (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 116-118). The advertisement below expresses a genuine relationship between the baby and the McDonald's burger. The way the baby is attached to the burger (i.e the breast) expresses genuine feelings of happiness and well-being. The close social distance between the baby and the burger (baby and his/her mother) is emphasized by means of the close-up which depicts a very close bond between the mum and her baby (i.e MacDonal'd's burger and the baby). The last dimension of the interactive function is the point of view or perspective

(Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 143), which again reveals close relationships between the participants of the advertisement. This is achieved by the focus of the camera-the participants are photographed from eye level angles, which emphasizes love and tenderness between mother and her child.

Compositional metafunction

Kress & van Leeuwen believe that compositional metafunction refers to "the way in which representations and communicative acts cohere into the kind of meaningful whole we call 'text' (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 181). Consequently, meaning in this theory is built by three interrelated and intertwined systems: information value, salience and framing. Information value is presented through three main visual areas: left and right; top and bottom; and centre and margin. The authors state that the left side is usually related to the given information, which is "assumed to be familiar and accepted as a point of departure for the message by the viewer". (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 179-185). In the advertisement to be analyzed, the McDonald's burger is placed in the left-hand side, which implies that it is as good and healthy

as Mother's milk and, importantly, this is a known fact. The baby's face which is placed in the right-hand side presents new information implying that the offered product is as safe as the mother's milk even to babies. Salience is expressed through the visual clues as to size, the sharpness of focus, tonal and colour contrast, placement in the visual field, perspective and specific cultural factors (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 201-203). Besides the salient elements, such as the baby and the burger, the logo of MacDonalds is also significant as it is the only verbally expressed element and establishes links between the image and the company. A warm, peach colour creates an overall positive ambience and emphasizes the state of contentment.

Discussion of the findings and Conclusion

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest several analytical tools for interpreting visual language. Based on the analysis of the advertisement according to the categories provided by the theory, it can be maintained that the advertisement presents the model of a bond between a mother and a child (the burger and the baby). The picture is presented through the combination of metafunctions indicated by the theory. The main function of the advertisement, persuasion, is achieved by the combination of all the three functions. Therefore, the model proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen can be utilized when describing and discussing multimodal texts, namely, printed advertisements.

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