VISUAL IMAGES IN ADVERTISEMENTS: AN ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGE

Mus Chairil Samani
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi
chairil@ukm.my

Abstract

Visual images are manufactured and produced in many forms such as running picture and still photographs. As an exploratory paper, I have sought to understand a system of language that exists in usage of photographs in print advertisements. To unearth the system of language, I have analysed still photographic images in advertisements that are published by two local Malaysian magazines on information technology. Still photographic images are chosen as object of study because we are now living in an industrialised and centrally managed discharge of massive symbols-systems that are part of the mainstream of common consciousness. These images symbols systems which are mass-produced and distributed by complex industrial structures, are loaded with signification. While the conclusion is somehow limited due to the scope of still photographic images that had been analyzed, the findings indicate an existent of a separate knowledge system for communicating of ideas.

Abstrak

Imej visual dihasilkan dan dikeluarkan dalam pelbagai bentuk seperti gambar bergerak ataupun gambar pegun. Sebagai sebuah kertas awal, saya telah cuba untuk memahami sistem bahasa yang wujud dalam penggunaan iklan bercetak. Untuk meneliti sistem bahasa ini, saya telah menganalisis imej gambarfoto iklan yang diterbitkan oleh dua majalah teknologi maklumat yang diterbitkan di Malaysia. Gambarfoto pegun dipilih sebagai subjek kajian sebab kita kini hidup dalam sistem simbol yang diurus dan terhasil dalam persekitaran perindustrian dan diurus secara berpusat yang membentuk sebahagian daripada aliran kesedaran umum. Sistem simbol imej ini dihasilkan secara massa dan diedarkan oleh struktur perindustrian yang kompleks dan penuh dengan signifikasi. Walaupun kesimpulan kertas ini terhad berdasarkan skop gambarfoto pegun yang dianalisis, tetapi dapatan menunjukkan wujudnya satu sistem pengetahuan yang berbeza untuk komunikasi idea.

Keywords: Visual images, symbols, advertisments, communication

Introduction

Photographs are important components in print advertisements. It is purposely used to convey messages just like verbal or written language is used to express ideas or thoughts. Messages in photographs published in print advertisements generate meanings through a system that is similar to languages. Readers of photographs used in advertisements learn to decode the encoded meaning that exists in them. The processing of these messages is complex and sophisticated and reader acquires this processing knowledge mostly through self-taught or "hard-wired".

The knowledge system used to encode and decode meanings is less structured than written or verbal language. Even though written or verbal language is structured, there exists room for interpretation by its user. None the less, idiosyncratic interpretation is tightly drawn through the process of learned meanings and dictionary definitions. Fiske and Hartley (1978: 39) said that "the greater the motivation, the smaller the role played by socially based convention; and the weaker the motivation, the more constraining is the convention."

In reading of photographs, I am reminded by what Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (1965) said in their book *A Concise History of Photography*: "No other medium can bring life and reality so close as does photography and it is the fields of reportage and documentation that photography's most important contribution lies in modern times." Photography today proved powerful agents in the awakening of social conscience.

Pierce was first to note that this self-taught system of knowledge is discovered upon perception. Pierce (1991: 258) made a passionate plea to scholars "not be in haste to deride a kind of thinking that is evidently founded upon observation." On this assumption, Moriarty (1996) argued that reality-grounded perceptual processes used in understanding these media are largely untutored and mastered through experience rather than education.

Thus the interpretation of photographs in advertisement is done unconsciously even though they do have a powerful effect on us. Photographs as well as other visual elements add another dimension to the written messages in advertisement to inform, persuade, provoke or motivate us to buy things, calls us to action, informs us about products, services, people, events and causes. Advertisement as tool for promotional purposes is done creatively to ensure impact among targeted audience. Selection and presentation of photographic visual images in a print advertisement can affect its meaning. Crane (1992: 15-16) argues that "(visual images) provide symbolic context that confers meanings on the product that it does not intrinsically possess. Specifically, (visual

images of) objects or people have connotations for the segment of the public (*emphasis mine*)".

Visual images in advertisements most often than not have been doctored to create a particular intended effect. It is manipulated with considerable sophistication in order to add symbolic meanings. Even though a visual image has been enhanced, the intended audience still manage to perceive its latent meanings. This is achievable because today we live in a ubiquitous mass media world where symbolic images are constantly bombarded on the idiot box.

Signs as Language

To unearth the system of language of photographs used in print advertisements, I undertook a semiotic analysis. As Saussure (1974: 16) has put forth semiotics is "a science that studies the life of signs within society." In this simple but all encompassing definition, Saussure was referring that language is made up of signs, which communicate meaning. Anything that could communicate meanings could be potentially studied s as linguistic signs, using the same method of analysis. Furthermore media texts are objects produced with the explicit intention to engaging an audience (Burton, 2005). What Saussure was trying to say but did not conceptualise is that language is actually a system of knowledge that allows one to think. With language as the fundamental and pervasive mode of human communication, we are apt to think that only language allows one to think. Thus it is accepted as the norm to assume that words construct our perception and understanding of reality since language is the primary mode of communication among human. With language, human is able to pass along information to the next generation. Our perception and understanding of reality are not necessary word based.

Uexkull (1981) who proposed Umwelt theory talks of an existence of a buffer zone or "umwelt". It says that between internal life of an individual and his or her outside world is a perceptual process that allows him or her to think or know of the outside world through his or her senses. In other words, non-verbal perception of meaning and construction of reality run in contrast to language-based theorists who believe that perception is only converted to knowledge through language.

Many visual communication scholars, such as Cherwitz and Hikins (1986) have long noted that it is possible to apprehend signs and make sense of them without the mediation of language. On this point, Arnheim (1997) was the person who coined the phrase that "visual perception is visual thinking." Arnheim (1997: 18) said, "The great virtue of vision is that it is not only a highly articulate

medium, but its universe offers inexhaustibly rich information about the objects and events of the outside world. Therefore, vision is the primary medium of thought."

On this premise, this paper concurs that photographs used in print advertisements work as a system of signs that gives form and meaning to consciousness and reality (see Bignell, 2002). While language is used to interpret certain types of information, especially abstract and theoretical concepts, but a great deal of what we process visually is managed not by stopping to find a word for it. Berger (1977: 7-8) in *Ways of Seeing* said:

> "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settle…. The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe."

Thus we communicate not only through words but also through our behaviour. To limit thinking only with words is actually losing the cue that communication is related to behaviour. Communication does not only occur in verbal or written language because as human we are endowed with many faculties that allow us to collate information from various sources. With information advancing through the various senses of sight, hear, touch, smell and taste, human beings interpret or construct meanings from a universe full of meanings.

Arnheim (1997) propounds that with "vision and hearing, shapes, colours, movements, sounds, are susceptible to definite and highly complex organisation in space and time. These two senses are therefore the media *par excellence* for the exercise of intelligence (*emphasis in the original*)." The processing of such information is done unconsciously that human beings are seldom aware of the complicated system of meaning construction that occurs in the human brain. It is only when they have lost the faculty to construct meanings due to some form of brain illnesses that they are aware of their peculiar deficiencies.

Research on the human brain indicates that human beings are capable of various forms of thinking and language is actually a finite capability. Thinking occurs in many forms and one of the earliest forms of thinking known to man since the age of the cavemen is visual. Human is said to have learned how to draw images to

convey ideas first before they even learn how to spell a simple word. Visual as a form of thinking is abandon almost instantaneously at once human beings acquire rudimentary spoken language. Visual images contain meaning but meaning is sometimes never straightforward. Almost always it conveys more than one form of meaning and people tend to judge this as its biggest setback.

To this Barthes (1977) argue that images are "polysemous" which means that underlying their signifiers are a floating chain of signified that readers are able to choose some and ignore others. Under such circumstances, words are needed to hold the connoted meanings by selecting for them a single specific meaning. While this may give the impression as though captions of images anchor the meaning of images. Reflecting on the ideas of Barthes, he said it is the reader who will anchor the meaning of images. Meaning as Halliday (1978) aptly pointed out is contextualise according to who 'reads', where, when, and for what reason.

Towards a Visual Vocabulary

To build a visual vocabulary appearing in images used in print advertisements, a semiotic analysis of all the advertisements appearing in two local magazines were analysed. The two magazines are *HWM* and *max-it*. Both are information and communication technology centred local magazines. *HWM* is published by Writeon Media Sdn Bhd, 27-3, Block H-08, Jalan PJU 1/37, Dataran Prima, 46500 Petaling Jaya and *Max-it* is published by Velocity Media Sdn Bhd, operating from E03-3, East Wing Subang Square, Jalan SS15/4G, 47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor. While both magazines are local publications, products advertised in them are definitely imported and produced by Multinational Corporations with sales or factories operating in the country. I have chosen to analyse advertisements appearing in the September issue of HWM (*Hardware Mag*) and *max-it*.

For each of the 68 advertisements analysed that were obtained from both magazines, it is presumed for every visual image its form of signification is rather arbitrary. It has meaning only when it represents an idea or thing. The relationship between semantics (the meaning of the information), syntactic (its visual representation) and pragmatics (the effect of the sign on the receiver) form a semiotic grid. In a perfectly closed-loop system will a visual image consistently represent the proper message and that the audience receives that message as intended.

Visual images in an analysed advertisement signified a range of possible meanings with two or more possible representation. Some of the photographs could not be fitted snugly into any of the categories.

A striking feature of visual images used in advertisements published by both magazines is that it is highly gender bias. When a woman model is used in an advertisement, it is most likely to signify ease of use for information technological equipment. Example of such signification can be seen in ads number 12, 15, 22, 35, 42, 49, and 54. Please refer to the appendix of this paper. If you put a group of young men relaxing and doing nothing, it can be used to signify ease of use as in the case of the advertisement number 9.

Children are also a preferred signification for ease of use. This can be seen in advertisement number 53.

If you have school age going children working a computer as the main models in an advertisement, it is definitely a sure-fire answer to signify learning as the case in advertisement number 3. A long shot of a person jumping and in an eclectic mode would signify freedom; such is the case for advertisement number 39. Freedom is also signified when a women model with her hair is being blown on a windy day, as the case of the advertisements number 8 and 40.

A group of people appearing to be looking around doing unrelated activities caught in a long distance shot would signify unlimited choice. This is indicative of the advertisement number 7.

A tight close-up showing only the eyes of an adult male figure is used to signify authority, which can be seen in advertisement number 19.

Young figures whether they are males or females are used to signify enjoyment and a carefree attitude towards life. These forms of signification can be seen in advertisements number 2, 20 and 27 Signification of enjoyment is fully illustrated in advertisement number 43 with a group of young people swaying to the beat of music blaring from the speakers. It is to signify that the multipurpose of handphone. Another way of signifying enjoyment is showing the posture of a women body swaying to the beat of music, as the case of advertisements number 35 and 41.

When a group of male and female models is composed in a photograph, it can also be used to signify true enjoyment. Such signification can be seen in advertisement number 16. A decisive form of enjoyment or ecstasy is signified with a male figure wearing earphones and his gapping mouth. This is shown in advertisement number 46. Is it true when a group of young male get together, the ultimate motive is to have fun, as in advertisements number 26 and 38.

With half the body of a model shown in a photograph with earphones, it is used to signify stereo sound. This is illustrated with the model seating in a meditating position enjoying to soothing sound, as illustrated in the advertisement number 28.

A big group of people in one big circle is use to signify connectivity as in advertisement number 6. Connectivity is signified with dotted lines linking two elements in an advertisement. This is shown in advertisements number 10 and 13. A young model surrounded with the latest information technology gadgets is indicative of connectivity. This is shown in advertisement number 17. Two people of different gender in close proximity would signify connectivity. This can be seen in advertisement number 21.

When there is a group of people holding hands whether in mid-air or on the ground, it is used to indicate connectivity. Signification of this sort can be seen in advertisement number 45. Connectivity can be signified with a picture of an older woman with a young child in an intimate situation. This is clearly signified in advertisement number 47.

With computer-generated figurines, it is most likely to indicate the ultimate thrill in computer game. This can be seen in advertisements numbers 14, 32, 37 and 44.

Freedom is also signified with a laptop caught frozen in mid-air as in the case of advertisement number 48. It can also be shown as a butterfly to signify freedom. This is shown in advertisement number 50. With a model slinging a laptop to signify a handbag, it is also used to signify freedom to roam around, as in the case of advertisement number 57.

Another form of freedom is mobility. Mobility is signified with a shot of a side profile of several laptops with the thinnest laptop indicating true mobility. Such is the photograph in the advertisement number 58.

When there are no human figures used in an advertisement, it is used to signify a preferred lifestyle. This can be seen in advertisements number 5, 33, and 56. Lifestyle can be signified in many forms. When electronic equipment is converted into a formula one racing car, it is used to signify lifestyle in the fast lane. This can be seen in advertisement number 51.

A thumbprint on a black screen is a powerful image that has been shown on numerously television programmes. With this image, it is to signify total security as in the case of advertisement number 1.

A road sign is good to signify motoring activities. *Carma* is a car magazine that creatively converted a road traffic sign featuring the nameplate of the magazine. This is shown in advertisement number 4.

A shot of stars in a night sky would indicate universality and global connectivity. This can be seen in advertisements number 23 and 52.

If you want to signify capturing real-life events perfectly showing a close-up of the lens of a camera should be sufficient. This

is signified in advertisement number 36. The still photo on a LCD panel of a digital camera is also used to signify reality, as the case of advertisements number 31, 34 and 55. Snapshots of everyday routine family activities are great signifiers of reality. The telephoto lens of a camera does not necessary means reality; it can be used to signify far-sightedness, thus is the meaning of the advertisement in number 29.

Wealth is related directly to accumulation of money. With the use of this symbol in any advertisements, we are actually signifying about generating wealth. It is indicative in advertisement number 30. Animals in the wilderness are great signifiers of nature. With a humanoid wearing skin-fit clothing in the form of part zebra, part leopard, and part cheetah, it clearly indicate back to nature. This is shown in advertisement number 25.

The female body has always signified grace and aesthetic beauty. Thus a still photograph of a ballerina doing one of her steps is definitely used to signify aesthetic beauty as in advertisement number 24. The eye of a woman is also strong signifiers of something beauty. Examples of this can be seen in advertisements number 18. Other than the female body, a tight close-up of a blooming flower is used to signify aesthetic beauty too. This is shown in advertisement number 11.

Conclusion

While the conclusion is somehow limited due to the scope of still photographic images that had been analysed, the findings indicate a system for photographic language. Photographs are complex system of signification and its meanings are produced and seen within a social, cultural context that appears to transcend physical nation-state boundaries. This is achievable because photographs as visual devices are central in most print advertisements. These advertisements are produced by multinational that are doing business globally thus bringing together commerce, mass media and design into creating a unique popular art form. Future research could dwell on the extent of understanding among mass media public of the system of photographic language.

While I may have argued the importance of photograph as a visual tool in print advertisement, I acknowledge that visuals can be created in many forms including illustration, graphics, typography or any other combination. Each of visual forms has their own systems of signification or knowledge system. I have purposely omitted reading the other elements in view of the fact that this is just an exploratory paper into visual as an alternative language. All are natural ways of communicating ideas.

References

Arnheim, R. (1997). *Visual thinking*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana.

Barthes, R. (1985). *The responsibility of forms: Critical essays on music, art and representation*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Berger, J. (1977). *Ways of seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.

Bignell, J. (2002). *Media semiotics: An introduction*. (2nd ed.). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Burton, G. (2005). *Media and society: Critical perspectives*. New York: Open University Press.

Cherwitz, R.A. & Hikins, J.W. (1986). *Communication and knowledge: An investigation in rhetorical epistemology*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.

Crane, D. (1992). *The production of culture: Media and the urban arts*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Fiske, J. & Hartley, J. (1978). *Reading television*. London: Methuen and Co.

Gerbner, G. (1985). Mass media discourse: Message system analysis as a component of cultural indicators. In Teun A. van Dijk (Ed.) *Discourse and communication: New approaches to the analysis of mass media discourse and communication*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). *Language as social semiotics*. London: Edward Arnold.

Helmut, G & Alison, G. (1965). *A concise history of photography*. London: Thomas and Hudson.

Moriarty, S. (1996). Abduction and a Theory of Visual Interpretation. *Communication Theory*, 6(2): 167-187.

Pierce, C.S. (1991). Pierce on signs. In James Hoopes (Ed.). *Pierce on signs*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.

Saussure, F. de. (1974). *Course in general linguistics*. London: Fontana.

Turner, G. (1993). Film languages. In David Graddol and Oliver Boyd-Barrett (Eds.) *Media texts: Authors and readers*. Clevedon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters Ltd. with the Open University.

Uexkull, T. von. (1981). The Sign Theory of Jakob von Uexkull. In M. Krampen (Ed.) *Classics of semiotics*. New York: Plenum Press.