

THE LANGUAGE OF ADVERTISING

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Abstract: *The paper is an attempt to show how semiotic study can be used to understand aspects of communication in food product advertising design. I will bring up some of the most common concepts and ideas in semiotics and see how they can be understood in such a context. I will also use some theories to analyze some underlying values and concepts like the complex interplay between sign systems, connotation and denotation, meaning and form. To apply semiotics in food product adverts has provide me with a set of invaluable tools for analyzing issues like identity, metaphors and representations. This approach studies how meanings are made in a set of two adverts and is not only being concerned with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality.*

Key words: *signifier, context, meaning, message.*

Introduction

By studying and applying semiotics to advertising we can become more aware of reality as a construction of the roles played by ourselves in representing or constructing it. Semiotics can assist us to understand that information or meaning is not “contained” in the world around us, books, products and items. Meaning is not “transmitted” to us – we actively create and represent it according to a complex interplay of codes of which we are normally not aware. Semiotics therefore studies not only “signs” in every day speech such as symbols, paintings or pictures, traffic signs or mathematic symbols, but everything which “stands for” something else.

Cultural production nowadays seems to be haunted by anxieties regarding the status of representation in what has been described as our “post-medium condition”. With the advent of digital media, photography in particular, has seemingly lost its credibility as a trace of the real, and it could be argued that the media in general face a certain crisis of legitimating. The digital

offers an ease of manipulation and distance from any referential grounding that seem to threaten the immediacy and certainty of referentiality we have come to associate with photography (Roland Barthes’s association of the photograph with the “absolutely, irrefutably present”).

[Barthes, 1981]

If the product advertised is to be successful, it must be compatible with the environment in which it is placed, and hence, like its textual context, the sign must be an appropriate “social construction” [Fiske,2007] of the customer and reader alike. Hence, the magazine acts as a signifier in itself, and therefore we can view the relationship between sign (advert) and text (magazine) as being mutually dependant, since the reader may judge the advert by its context (the magazine) and vice versa.

Analysis

The two adverts to be analyzed do not physically represent the products themselves; they provide an important iconic representation of both the product

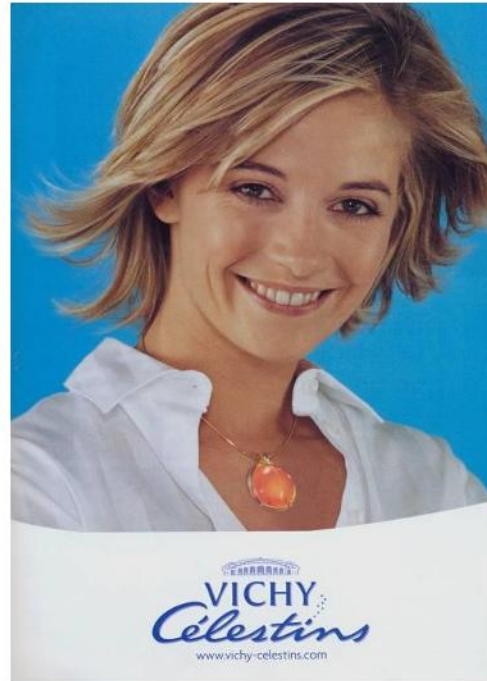
advertised and what the product should stand for. Thus, the analysis of these adverts strongly focuses upon the advertisements' photographic imagery, and the ways in which this imagery generates the appropriate signified concepts (or emotional overtones) which promote the image of the product.

Therefore, the paper analyzes individually the two adverts in terms of their status as signs, metaphors and representations, whose associative meanings not only give a favorable impression of the product, but are also compatible with and complementary to the context in which they are situated; thus illustrating Umberto Eco's claim that the medium and message may be "charged with cultural signification".[Eco, 2002]

"Example A" is given in picture 1:



Picture 1: "Vichy Celestins"



Picture 1: "Vichy Celestins"

"Example B" is given in picture 2:



Picture 2: "Carlsberg beer"

Thus, both adverts (figures 1 and 2) strongly rely upon this use of photographic imagery.

The first example A, given in picture 1, features an advertisement for the mineral drinking water “Vichy”. It uses a variety of signifiers which publicize both the identity of the brand and an image which is in line with the ideology of the text in which it appears, which in this case is the youthful glamorous *Elle* magazine. The advert predominantly features a female model in her mid thirties, smiling and looking straight into the viewer’s eyes. Adjacent to her is an iconic image of the product itself, which is projected as being disproportionately large. The syntagma: “With Vichy Celestins my skin is shining” is placed above the bottle of mineral water, and following the eye view line there is a kind of rhetorical question: “Why only Vichy Celestins gives my skin such shining?”, and together these separate components form an effective and unified message. At a simple level it is easy to deduce two obvious things. Firstly, that the subject, (the image of the woman) provides a youthful element of glamour which serves both the product and the text in which it is being advertised and, secondly, that the image of the light blue background is a physical reiteration of the product name *Celestin*. However, the more interesting semiotic elements of the advert exist within its notion of shining, which is the advert’s primary signified concept. The notion of shining is primarily conveyed by the image of the woman smiling and extremely at ease, thus providing a sense of well being and wealth which are conveyed by her neat elegant clothing. Furthermore the softly focused quality of the photography, and the advertisements colouring of gentle blues and white are further signifiers which contribute to this image of healthy well being state. However, these elements alone certainly do not convey this central signified concept, for this is only guaranteed by the inclusion of the statement: “*Eclat du teint*” – “*Shine of skin*”. Thus a strong

relationship is allowed to be forged between the signifiers (the photographic image of the protagonist and the product to be promoted) and the signified which is linguistically expressed by “With Vichy Celestins my skin is shining”. Therefore, this stabilization between the signifier and the signified allows for the creation of a plausible commodity code. This code attributes basic meaning to the advert, which conventional combination of iconic image and linguistic representation (of words and pictures) allows the recipient to receive a message, which is justified and reiterated by the relationships of resemblance at play.

Thus, although the average reader of *Elle* magazine will not be aware of the terms discussed or the technicalities of this process, he or she will be aware of the mutually complementary relationship between words and imagery. This relationship not only ensures the advert’s uniform message, it also ensures the advert’s plausibility. For, it is the advert’s typically obvious contrivance between word and image which allows the recipient to view the advert within its generic context. Therefore, it is arguable that this acceptability would not be guaranteed if one sign wasn’t reinforced by the other, if for example the advertisement was presented merely as a photograph in its own right, without a written statement, contextualizing and clarifying the photograph’s meaning. Finally, it is also worthwhile to note that the advertisement sense of balance is matched by its compatibility with the textual context in which it arises. This compatibility can be illustrated by referring back to the colors of the advert, which consist of softly focused blues and whites and oranges. Although *Elle* magazine is read by women, unlike the other magazine in this analysis, it is the feminine colors in the advert which depict a sign which is designed to be

compatible with the intended recipients of it.

Reflecting the emphasis which the sign attributes to being reflective of the textual context in which is situated, is “Example B” which is an advertisement for beer by Carlsberg. Emphasizing the product’s distinct value is a set of signs which are carefully orchestrated to convey a relevant and unified message. It is subtle and artistic, and it attempts to construct a plausible relationship between the product and a prescribed emotion such as “precious moments”. The advert presents a suggestive iconic image, namely an open shell made of two bottle green metallic corks with a golden pearl like drop of beer. We are not explicitly told of the emotional association which the product is supposed to bring to the viewer, but we can deduce its high quality: any drop of such beer is as precious as a pearl, and thus allowing us to form our own emotional associations with the brand, associations which will undoubtedly be complicit with the genre of the viewer. Although this advert seems to be simple, its connotative meanings allow our interpretation of it to be a pragmatic one, in that its signifiers have particular relevance with regards to the context of the advert. One such group of signifiers is the advertisement’s colors. Unlike the subtle feminine colors of Example A, the Carlsberg consists of a bold color scheme of green shades and shining gold ones as well; and together with the gold metallic appearance of the product, this color scheme serves as a significant group of signifiers which attribute the brand with the same sense of high quality and preciousness. Hence, the role and importance of this color scheme in both adverts show that they are part of an organized system of signifiers which form significant cultural and aesthetic codes.

In order to develop the theme of the role of the shared values of the producers and readers of a text, it is relevant to discuss

the emphasis which is attributed to the advertising of the product in a way which is relevant to the cultural experience and expectations of the consumer. Again, ‘Example B’- (the advertisement for Carlsberg beer) provides a strong illustration. Carlsberg is a western Danish brand predominantly marketed and used in the West, as is the magazine *Eurograduate* in which the advertisement appears. Predictably, the advert exhibits strongly western overtones, and this is evident through its subject, and through its copy. Thus, it is a strong example of the way an advert uses shared prior cultural experience to attribute meaning to its symbolic representation of the product. Furthermore, this example reiterates the various levels of meaning which are present in sign, as was most predominately argued by Barthes. Using Barthes’s concepts, it is possible to summarize the significance of the implicit cultural overtones of Example B: primarily the existence of the sign (in this case the advert) provides the image’s simple denotative meaning; it is an advertisement for beer. This is simple information, and in Barthes terms it is a “message without a code”. However, as was discussed, this code is given connotative meaning, its “plane of expression” (Barthes) through specific signifiers, all of which have a strong relationship with the cultural context of the advert, and the cultural context of the western society. Thus, it is the signifiers of the adverts and the artistry of the font, all reinforce the product’s intended identity, and allow the recipient to perceive this sign as an image which is relevant to him, if not to his actual experience, then relevant to the shared perceptions and experience of the society he is part of.

Therefore the two examples illustrate V.Volosinov’s argument that “whenever a sign is present, an ideology is present too” [Volosinov, 1929]. In the case of these

advertises the ideology is one which reflects values of health, well being, and high quality. Moreover, the iconic resemblance of the product fulfills an illustrative function, a means of conveying a basic resemblance of the product whose connotative meanings are portrayed through other means- usually via the subject.

Conclusions

If the product advertised is to be successful, it must be compatible with the environment in which it is placed, and hence like its textual context, the sign must be an appropriate “social construction” of the customer and reader alike. Hence, the magazine acts as a signifier in itself, and therefore we can view the relationship between sign (advert) and text (magazine) as being mutually dependant, since the reader may judge the advert by its context (the magazine) and vice versa.

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high quality. Moreover, the iconic resemblance of the product fulfills an illustrative function, a means of conveying a basic resemblance of the product whose connotative meanings are portrayed through other means- usually via the subject.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to give a semiotic analysis of advertisements which signifiers are not only designed to give a favorable and appropriate image of the product, but they are also shown to have strong relationships with the textual context which they are located in.

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