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**Title**

**THE USE OF VISUAL CUES AND METAPHORS IN  
ADVERTISING**

**Author(s)**

**Vikram Kapoor**

**M.Com, PGDBM, PGDAM, MIMA, AMAMI, CPM**

**Freelancer, Kolkata, INDIA**



**Abstract:**

By evoking profound thoughts and emotions, visual cues grab a reader's attention. It allows them to interpret the image in a literal and metaphorical way. Visual cues are used ubiquitously in advertising in the form of graphic designs and pictures. To make the most out of an advertisement, the advertiser must use visual elements effectively. This paper highlights how the visual cueing process works in the development of the viewers' interpretations in areas such as metaphoric meanings with real-world Television advertisements. Mere symbolic meanings are primarily culturally derived and dependent on learned meanings. Hence, these ideas are loosely fastened and less anchored in iconographic representation and are not devoid of personal and idiosyncratic interpretation.

**Keywords:** Iconographic representation, catachresis, symbolic metaphors, embodied cognition, metamorphosing.

**1 Introduction: Advertising and the Early Twentieth Century**

Having grown in stature and recognition, advertising in the early twentieth century fostered some distinctive styles of its own. Two of the approaches which marked an insurrection were "soft-sell" and "hard-sell". The soft-sell approach was characterized by subtle and fine-drawn ads with a literary style and attention to form, color and visualization. The hard-sell approach emphasized on the concrete and substantial "reason-why" for a product's superiority. One or the other of these two styles dominated the advertising scene during different periods. The outbreak of World-war I witnessed the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of both these styles. On the agency side, J. Walter Thompson led the advertising upsurge with a myriad of novel services. He tried to base advertising on psychology and research (emotion and reason), which has continued till date. As a period of recession set in from 1959-1961, the time seemed seasoned for some innovation in the advertising world. The period 1960-1970 spearheaded a creative revolution in advertising with David Ogilvy attempting to reconcile the two great schools of thoughts in advertising- "hard-sell" and "soft-sell", with his Rolls-Royce campaign which clubbed "claim" and "image" together.

A one-fold ad appeared during this time that reformed the course of advertising history. It was for the Volkswagen, a seemingly unprepossessing car. The ad transgressed all the exciting ideas about car advertising at that time. It was sans any wide-angle photography or beautiful women. Just the uninviting little car sitting there with the headline “Lemon” underneath (Lemon refers to an unsatisfactory or defective thing, especially a car). The text of the ad explained the negative headline:

The popular Volkswagen was a “lemon” because a quality-control inspector noticed a blemished chrome strip on the glove compartment, and no Volkswagen leaves the factory with even such a tiny defect. Highlighting a defective car represented a totally new kind of advertising.

This ad was created by William Bernbach of the Doyle, Dane and Bernbach agency that was also responsible for the creative revolution of the 1960’s. The idea came from people with ordinary backgrounds but who could talk to consumers in the language they believed in.

## **2.1 Metaphors and their deep meanings:**

Why do ad campaigns and new products often flounder? Why is it that the consumers hold that companies do not fathom their needs? This is primarily because marketers themselves do not think about consumers’ thoughts and feelings in a profound way.”Depth deficit” is what Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay Zaltman, in their book *Marketing Metaphoria* refer this to. Visual cues and metaphors populate the consumers’ unconscious minds. From the days of Volkswagen’s Lemon ad to the present day eye-grabbing ads, there has been a dramatic transition. Discerning how people use visual cues and deep metaphors will help cultivate new products, propel innovations, reinforce purchases and consumption experiences, originate arresting communication, and much more. Successfully leveraging deep metaphors and visual cues can mitigate advertisers’ task. Metaphors are weathering headways of perceiving things and making sense of our encounters. It also navigates our subsequent actions. One could say that metaphors symbolize an ever-evolving symbiosis between brain, body and soul. Deep metaphors are largely unconscious and start flourishing at birth, thereafter being moulded by our social milieu. Equally important, deep metaphors capture what anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists call human universals, or near universals, the traits and behaviors found in nearly all societies (Kagan, 2006). In traditional research, consumers respond to ideas imposed on them, not generated by them. Political



psychologist Drew Westen, in his critique of focus groups, comments, “If you ask people conscious questions about unconscious processes, they will be happy to offer you their theories. But, most of the time these theories are wrong” (Westen, 2007). By probing and analyzing the non-literal expressions of consumer’s metaphors, we can compare what consumers are actually experiencing with what they are saying about the experience ([www.implicit.harvard.edu](http://www.implicit.harvard.edu)). There is a “say-mean” gap. Once marketers take in the anatomy of emotions associated with deep metaphors they can pick up how to engage the emotions using metaphoric cues in designing of products, in shopping environments, on hoardings and billboards on the highways, and other communications. Marketers often design research to discover archetypes, which are generic or idealized representations of someone or something; by specifically asking consumers what kind of person or what kind of animal best describes the brand and store. However, this approach has its own setbacks. Marketers must elicit such archetypes naturally. We possess schemas about nearly every situation in life, ranging from what constitutes an appropriate brand of apparel to finding a life partner.

Gerald Zaltman and Lindsay Zaltman have categorized metaphors into Surface Metaphors (eg, I feel as if I am nauseated), Metaphor themes (eg, Diseases cause imbalance) and Deep metaphors (eg, Balance). However, for the purpose of this paper, we consider only the term “metaphors”, assuming that metaphors are deep as they are largely unconscious.

### **Visual Cueing:**

A signal or indication of something is a cue. It brings to mind something from distant knowledge or experience that furnishes a structure of meanings that helps in interpretation. Hue, color, size, shape, texture, depth, etc are some examples of visual cue. As much of the past experience is stored in memory as a visual element, cueing as a concept plays a significant role in visual communication. It is particularly essential for successful decoding of message forms. A niche form of symbolic communication, however, is derived from metaphoric thinking. Metaphors point out commonalities and parallelism between two things. They rekindle meanings by transposing qualities from a referent to a new object through implicit comparison, the resemblance being based on an analogy. As a simile is a specific type of metaphor, thus, most visual communication that uses analogical thinking is referred to as metaphoric. Metaphors are

generative as they can amplify the traditional way of perceiving and this, of course, can produce a variety of idiosyncratic meanings. Visual metaphors typically resort to substantial and concrete form –such as buildings, flags, people, statues, possessions- to represent abstract ideas such as freedom, liberty, identity, hope, despair, endurance, etc. Metaphors entail puzzle through tensions and ambiguities implicit in the metaphoric form.

Our senses and motor systems are responsible for providing categories that contribute to our perception, understanding and expression of abstract thoughts and feelings. This categorization is known as Embodied Cognition (Zaltman, 2008). Vision is a frequent source of Embodied Cognition. This is not bewildering, given that more than 60 percent of stimuli reaching the brain do so via the visual system. Body is the key mode of expression then. For instance, a teddy bear renders an image of softness when placed with a fabric softener.

"Studies of visual metaphors used for rhetorical purposes generally concentrate on advertising. A familiar example is the technique of juxtaposing a picture of a sports car . . . with the image of a panther, suggesting that the product has comparable qualities of speed, power, and endurance. A variation on this common technique is to merge elements of the car and the wild animal, creating a composite image. In an ad for Canadian Furs, a female model wearing a fur coat is posed and made up in a way that is slightly suggestive of a wild animal. To leave little doubt as to the intended meaning of the visual metaphor (or simply to reinforce the message), the advertiser has superimposed the phrase 'get wild' over her image (Kaplan, 2005)." "We have noticed a decrease in the amount of anchoring copy used in visual metaphor ads. We theorize that, over time, advertisers have perceived that consumers are growing more competent in understanding and interpreting visual metaphor (Phillips, 2006)". A gadget for spurring on insights and acumen a visual metaphor has no determinate proposition while using visual metaphors. They just provide viewers with a food for thought. A visual metaphor can sometimes be in the form of catachresis or a mixed metaphor. Here the group of metaphors is taken from the donor field, for instance, on the one hand we find blood vessels-as-rivers, on the other hand we also find tributaries, recanalizations, inflow, outflow, bridges, etc. It seems as if such metaphors are 'natural' extensions of the metaphorical images. It cognitively provokes the viewers.

However, visual continuity of the themes relies on a set of colors equally distributed around a central character. The Airtel ads capitalize on the Airtel logo which is a strong, contemporary



and confident symbol for a brand that is always in the forefront of the rest. The Airtel Image style uses a visual cue that incorporates two solid, red rectangular forms whose counter form creates an open doorway. This open doorway is the visual cue used here which could be interpreted differently. The title case lettering with its capital 'A' was deliberately chosen to reinforce the brand's leadership position. The red dot on the letterform 'I' cues Airtel's focus on innovation. The words 'Express Yourself' are very much part of the brand identity. The Airtel Colour Palette is also drafted to represent the lettering in grey so that the pure black of Airtel is visually unharmed. The phrase 'Express yourself' was successfully launched taking the ownership of the entire space of communication and strengthening the emotional bond Airtel enjoys with its customers. Airtel is a market leader in the cellular network and they wanted a very fresh and contemporary idea to build a brand image which their customers could identify. Hence, Airtel ads are now replete with visual cues of Relationship to enforce and strengthen its brand image going beyond language and address communities irrespective of language.

Another TV ad is Britannia Treat Biscuit which features the famous Indian cricketer, Sachin Tendulkar and a cute kid therein. This ad shows how each of us become a child when we play with them and how champions like Sachin will not take defeat lightly even if it is for a joke. This is portrayed in a cute and gentle manner; the arrogance is beautifully hidden and replaced with positive emotions. Visual cues are used herein with very few verbal messages.

### **Communication through visual cues- A classic ad by Raymond**

The ad agency RK Swamy BBDO has floated a novel television commercial for Raymond suitings. This new television commercial titled "Foreign Posting" probes yet another deep metaphor 'Relationship' in the life of 'The Complete Man'-that with his mother.

The film with no verbal messages, very aesthetically captures the emotions around a 'juncture of success' for the young man, and the bliss along with related concerns of the mother while she absorbs the news of her son's foreign posting. The mother's ecstasy is apparent on her face, but she is also concerned by the void her life will be, with her son gone to Singapore. The well-attired son was not oblivious about his mother's concerns, and hands over her passport and air tickets to Singapore. The mother is over-whelmed and moved by the son's thoughtfulness and caring gesticulation. This is what makes him 'The Complete Man'- the perfect man and the



winner in every way. The ad takes us to a different plane altogether where we can experience the extreme affinity through visual cues of dancing of the son with his mother on a subtle note, the mother holding the son's hands and feeling the Raymond suiting, the ambivalence in the mother's mind, and the son's touching the mother's feet for her benediction. People unaware of the Indian culture and tradition get very baffled when they see children in India touching the feet of their elders. In fact, the commonest Indian gesture is touching someone's feet which means the person who is doing the act is showing his reverence and subservience to the one whose feet he/she is touching. However, this may be seen as very idiosyncratic in other cultures. This ad with only visual cues and the written words "Feels like Heaven" and "Feels like Raymond" draws a metaphor that feeling Raymond is like feeling heaven. The only verbal words in the advertisement "The Complete Man" with the mother-son relation depicted therein would remind and foster the relationship of any son with his mother. By the use of the aforesaid two phrases, the ad points at the feeling of being in heaven when holding Raymond. This is also a hidden slogan which may or may not be ciphered. Successful ads are often well-researched where visual cues are used to gauge whether it would be properly interpreted. This ad and such other ads like Nokia go beyond vision. These are value-centric representing one's values and belief systems, which vary across cultures. The following are certain images from the Television commercials:



Figure 1: Images from the Raymonds video ad (Source: Youtube)

### Another Classic ad using visual cues- The Vodafone-Hutch ads:

The Vodafone ad where a dainty little girl is constantly getting help from a cute little pug in a host of situations while a beautiful jingle is played in the background uses visual cues effectively. The ad ends saying that “*Vodafone is all too happy to help you*” when you need them. After taking over Hutch, Vodafone have also incorporated Hutch’s Pug mascot as their mascot. Ogilvy and Mather have used the friendship between a dog and a human very creatively to make their point – Vodafone is “Happy to help” its customers just like the pug in the ad helping the little girl through difficult times and everywhere the girl goes. Splendidly and sensationally thought, this ad is highly appreciated. The chemistry between the little girl and the pug is breathtakingly adorable. The ad makers have used the concept of a dog helping a little girl like never before with subtlety which is so evident in the ad. The jingle “Stay by my side” based on the music of Manu Chao’s “Mama Call” is so melodious that you’ll keep humming it for a long time. The music makes this ad qualify for repeated viewing and the visual cues of Relationship qualify for recalling. The ad used the relationship cue between a loyal dog and a little girl. All the scenes are visually a treat to the eyes of the viewers. The ad doesn’t have verbal messages; only a silent communication between a little girl and her loyal dog in the backdrop of a beautiful music. These are some images captured from the television advertisement:





Figure 2: Images from the Vodafone-Hutch video ad (Source: Youtube)

### **Significance of Attention in Advertising**

The two essential parts of print advertising are gaze and attention. What can be a daunting task for marketers are finding out how people look at an advertisement, what catches viewers' attention most quickly, what makes a product look more desirable to a magazine or newspaper reader? The panacea lies in an understanding of the science behind visual perception. The role of images in advertising can be better understood when we study certain phenomena related to gaze and attention. One important concept is that of attention itself. It is said to be an orienting response to a stimulus signifying that the stimulus has made a contact with a sense organ (Clark, 1994). One function of advertising is to regulate the amount of additional processing effort a stimulus receives (Clark, 1994). Obviously, paying closer attention involves more processing effort. Another necessary aspect of attention and advertising is iconicity, which describes the fact pictures recreate the kinds of visual information that our eyes and brains make use of when we look at the real world (Messaris 1996). According to Paul Messaris, Iconicity does not have to entail a complete surface similarity between a picture and reality as long as the picture reproduces visual cues that we use in real world vision. This concept is not confined to just to the content of images but also can be characteristic of their formal or stylistic qualities (Messaris, 1994). The long and short is that we expect pictures to verify our conception of the world, and if the picture violates reality, it draws out attention so effectively. This is closely related with meta-codes. Unnatural depictions such as picture violating reality give rise to what is known as a "conceptual conflict," in which a strange and surprising set of circumstances in an advertisement brings uncertainty to the reader, requiring more cognitive energy to understand. This promotes better attention because the confusion must be resolved in order to understand the ad, and the work done by the mind promotes better memory of the answer (East, 2003). This fact about attention brings forth the question of how consumer psychology and attention affect companies' advertising strategy. High contrast, a concentrated area of focus, and occasional violations of laws of physics are often seen today in advertisements. The question remains unanswered as to which of them value more. There are some means to capture attention of the viewers; visual discontinuity in depth and non-matching cue may be alternative means. On the other hand, visual



illusion may also be created with the purpose of making two apparent discontinuous things to look continuous by matching the background color or depth cue and put them in the same plane. Morphing is also used in advertising to capture viewers' attention. A short form for metamorphosing, morphing refers to an animation technique in which one image is gradually turned into another through seamless transition. It could be shown as a fantasy or a surreal sequence. Advertising often uses a cross-fading form to create morphs. The following first picture shows how morphing is used where a car is converted into a tiger, the hidden meaning of which is that the car is as strong and fast as a tiger. This method actually transfers the power or energy of one object to the other usually from a living being to a non-living object or from a less powerful being to a more powerful being by means of some transformation; a cue for non-linguistic means of a metaphor. Another picture is also shown where the face of a man undergoes through a seamless transition to become a tiger. Metamorphosing is very much a regular feature in advertisements to capture viewers' attention.

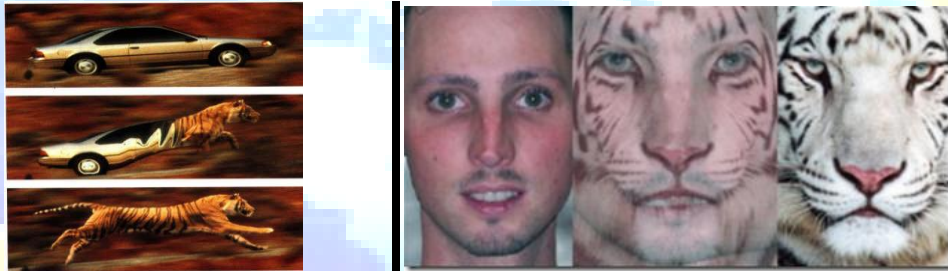


Figure 3: The Use of Morphing in Advertisements

## 2.6 Conclusions:

The employment of pictorial metaphors in global advertisements is a significant issue that can enhance our understanding of how culture impacts the way consumers decode messages. Images are not just typical and naturalistic representations of reality. Unconventional metaphors are constantly being implemented by the advertisers to contest the audience's cognitive processes. These have been discussed in this paper. The consumers' relying on erstwhile knowledge is indispensable to clearly understand the message. Thus, whether this foregoing knowledge is similar across cultures is a fundamental question in cross-cultural advertising. This paper mainly gives culture-specific examples from the Indian advertising. Further research in this area should assay the relationship between culture and the visual metaphor. However, the apparent dearth of a metaphor in a visual ad may in fact contest audiences living in an environment plenary with

metaphors to develop inadvertent analogies using cultural stereotypes and conventions. Advertising researchers would therefore benefit from an understanding of how consumers from different cultures cogitate the different types of metaphors and what are valued by different cultures. Further research in the aforesaid area would be highly significant in understanding cross-cultural metaphor-related advertising and drafting booming global advertisements.

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