

A Socio-semiotic Multimodal analysis of Meaning in Energy drink advertisements

Prof. Chukwu, Ephraim

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

&

Enemuo, Olachi

Nwafor, Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

olachionyeubi@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the meaning making resources in multimodal advertisements that influence brand patronage. Drawing from Guther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design (1996, 2001, & 2006), richly situated in Hallidayan semiotic orientation, this article analyses two energy drink advertisements (Bullet and Supakomando) advertisements as multimodal resources. The data for the analysis are drawn from the official Instagram page of the two brands. The study specifically examines the interpersonal functions (gaze, shots and angle) and compositional functions (salience and framing) as obtained in visual grammar. The analysis shows that advertisement made good use of demand gaze, close shots and frontal angles to interact with the viewers. For the compositional meaning the images for greater emphasis were properly foregrounded and there was proper distribution of colour. The presence of well- built models and young male celebrities were employed to pass the message of strength and energy, moreso, to create a strong link between the images and the audience. These findings suggest that all the multimodal resources employed in the creation of the advertisements are structured as meaning making resources, not dependent on the verbal texts.

Keywords: Multimodality, meaning, socio-semiotics, energy drink advertisements

Introduction

Language as a means of communication plays a vital role in human society. It involves the meaningful exchange of ideas, thoughts, feelings information and messages from one person to another at a particular place and within a particular time. It is the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules (Kamalu and Ojatula, 2019). Communication may take up different forms which include: verbal communication which entails the use of words in encoding and decoding the intended message; non-verbal communication which employs the use of other forms of expression besides writing and talking in sending and receiving messages; and visual communication.

For a long while, many linguists and discourse analysts have focused mainly on the spoken and written discourse, neglecting the other semiotic modes of communication (Gu, O'Halloran & Smith, Luo and O'Toole). However, in recent times many texts have become extremely multimodal with images and typefaces: newspapers articles are now produced with eye-catching photos and advertisements with images that are salient. But their semiotic modes are seen and considered the work of specialists.

Since the advent of digital technology, the different modes have been fused into texts and these modes are employed to suit a particular purpose or representation. Hence, it is hard to find a single mode which exists alone in a discourse because every mode plays a vital role in the making of meaning and this is the concern of multimodal discourse and visual communication.

Visual communication is the process of transferring ideas, messages and information through the use of images, symbols, and signs. It involves the creation of messages that are designed to be seen and understood by humans. It can further be used to communicate ideas, emotions and instruction. Visual communication is used in a variety of settings such as business, education, government, and healthcare. It is also largely used in advertising and marketing and can be very effective in getting attention and influencing people's behavior. Visual communication employs the use of visual aids such as signs, typography, drawings, graphic design, industrial design, animation, illustration, colour and other electronic devices or resources in sending and receiving messages.

In recent times, advertisements have become part of the daily lives of people and play an inevitable and indispensable role in any human society (Luo, 2010). It can be placed on all forms of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, billboards, books or letters or modern media such as television, networking sites and computers. Semiotic modes, especially visuals, have become important in all aspects of advertisements which are evident in multimodal resources such as the use of language, images, frames, sounds, colours that serve as a better way of conveying meaning in any advertisement.

Most recently, the emergence of information technology, the internet, social networking sites have provided new channels for advertisement, new modes of communication and new ways of making meaning known as social media. This innovation has also caused a change in the way advertisements are done in most businesses. By implication, the social media has transformed advertisement from the traditional method of newspapers, books, public announcement, to new ones which are, “fundamentally different from those found in the other semiotic situations.

Over the years several studies have been carried out within the domains of visual communication and advertising by different academic scholars in critical discourse studies and various media studies. It is also a well-established fact that media practitioners and content creators have constantly explored the social media in a bid to sell their products through advertising. This has further caught the interest of numerous scholars and diverse issues have been explored on the relationship between language and advertisement. However, none of these researches to the best of the current researcher’s knowledge has explored the overall components of multimodal texts and how they communicate meaning to existing and intending consumers especially in online energy drink advertisements.

Modern day advertising employs visual images such as texts, signs and symbols that are fused into complementary whole. With this complexity, the reader is expected to unravel both the meaning and significance each of the represented modes carry. Unfortunately, it always poses a problem when trying to identify the multimodal components of in online advertisements and unmask the meaning and strategies employed in these advertisements that help to promote patronage.

In multimodal communication and analysis, linguistic resources, typography as well as the visual images used come together to achieve highly meaningful constructs. In a bid to make the beverage (energy drinks) advertisements captivating and persuasive and, by extension, increase sales, various modes such as speech, gestures, symbols, visuals and other signaling tools are drawn into the domain of social communication for meaning construction. This study, thus, aims at exploring, identifying and analyzing the linguistic components in advertisements and how they are manipulated through the meaning they carry to enhance patronage. The objectives of this study therefore are to identify the multimodal resources that make up the energy drink advertisements and to find out how the resources are manipulated to communicate with the consumers.

The following research question have been put forward:

- a. What multimodal resources are employed in the energy drink advertisements and how are the linguistic resources able to communicate meaning to consumers?

Conceptual Framework

Multimodality

Multimodality is a term used to describe the fusion of more than one semiotic mode within a given context (Gibbons 2012:8). For Kress and Leeuwen (2001:20) multimodality is defined as “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined”. Generally, it is seen as “an interdisciplinary approach drawn from social semiotics that understands communication and representation of a range of meaning-making forms” (Jewitt 2013, p. 1). This entails that these “range of meaning-making forms or multimodes maybe purposely employed to perform a particular function: for instance, they maybe complementing each other, performing reinforcing roles or even being hierarchically ordered (Luke, 2013).

Historically, multimodality can be traced back to Critical Linguistics which focused on investigating ideology in language alone. In order to achieve this, it drew insights from the works of Halliday (1985).

The Critical Linguistic approach emphasizes that language is the only system through which meanings are made and ideologies unraveled. Thus, multimodality originated in the 1980's to address the limitations of Critical Linguistics by proposing that other kinds of visuals in a text could be meaning-making resources and could be analyzed from a social semiotic perspective.

Language and Advertising

Advertising is a socio-economic activity in modern times used to promote certain products and services to the world. They are those everyday messages that project a particular brand and persuade the target audience to buy. Chafai (2008) observes that advertising has become a "tool" used to sell and offer products since advertising has gained the attention and interest of a large number of individual in different societies in the world. Furthermore, advertisements can also be interpreted as a public notice which is designed to spread information. According to White as cited in Chafai (2008, p. 5), "advertising exists to help selling things which are limited; to give utilitarian information about the product, with the objective of informing the consumers about necessity and the importance of the commodity advertised".

Advertising deals with the propagation of commercialized communication contents to more than one person, intended to inform or change behavior (Broadbent, 2001). It is a mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future (Richards and Curran, 2002). Advertising is a key element of the promotional activity which has become the undisputed spokesman of modern marketing which is characterized by centralized and mass production, differentiated and branded products, widely dispersed and sophisticated consumers (Onyenyili-Onuorah, 2005). As noted by Keller (2008), it is a powerful means of creating strong, favorable, and unique brand associations and eliciting positive judgments and feelings.

Social Semiotics

Social semiotics is an approach to semiotics that stresses the connection between language and social context. Proponents of social semiotics opine that language cannot be separated from social context hence, studies in social semiotics focus on the study and analysis of signs used in social context. This view stipulates that linguistic forms and other signifying tools alone cannot determine meaning as the social and cultural contexts of communication help in the understanding of the representation of such communication tools. Social semiotics, thus, focuses not only on the signs but also on the sign users and context of sign use. This underscores Hodge and Kress' (1988:261) submission that "social semiotics is concerned with the social meanings constructed through the full range of semiotic forms, through semiotic texts and semiotic practices". This typifies social semiotics as espousing how individuals within a social context make sense of and understand messages embedded in texts produced using a wide array of semiotic resources.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical focus for this study is rooted in Kress and Van Leeuwen's socio-semiotic framework. This approach to multimodal texts considers any form of visual design as a grammar which describes the way semiotic elements such as images, colour, pictures and sounds are combined in visuals to produce meaning (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Visual images are parts of Critical Discourse because all forms of visual images are seen as texts performing a particular function that language alone performs. These functions are categorized into three broad metafunctions which are the representational, interactional and the compositional metafunction.

The **representational metafunction** corresponds with the ideational function in visual grammar. It addresses or identifies all the visual resources (people, places and things) represented in visual images as well as the representation of interactions and conceptual relations between them. These visual resources are known as **participants**. The participants at this level are further categorized into two types: the represented participants and the interactive participants.

The **interpersonal metafunction** identifies the resources that construct relationship between the viewer, the maker of the visual text and those represented in the text (**participants**). This level of visual grammar fulfils the function of enacting social interactions (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). The resources used to realize the interpersonal function include: gaze, distance, angle and modality.

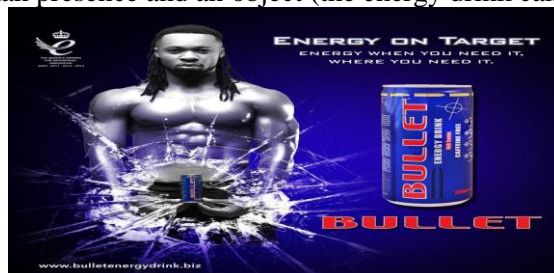
The **compositional metafunction** identifies the cohesion or connectivity between the elements of a text. It serves as a link that connects the representational meaning and the interactive meaning through three associated principles (information value, framing and salience). These three levels of socio-semiotics by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) are resources for meaning derivation. However, this study only explores the interactive meaning and compositional meaning with particular focus to gaze, distance, salience and framing.

Methodology

This study centres on how the semiotic resources in selected energy drink advertisements in Nigeria are able to produce meaning that will in turn influence patronage. Two energy drink brands were randomly selected for the purpose of this study. The selected brands include: Bullet energy drink and Superkomando energy drink. The study explores a socio-semiotic approach to multimodal texts of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) with particular focus on the interpersonal and compositional strategies employed by the composers to communicate social meaning as well as the link between the nature of social practice and the properties of language “texts” that may result in patronage. The study is qualitative and seeks to investigate how discourse in advertisements involves people’s construction of meanings.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The Bullet energy drink is one of the leading energy drink brands in Nigeria. With a wide range of variants, it has stood the test of time and has also satisfied the needs of its consumers. The advertisement has a dark scenery with a fusion of dark and black colours. The represented participants in the flier include: human presence and an object (the energy drink can) that are placed side by side.



Interpersonal Metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction focuses on the interaction between the viewers or consumers of a visual text and the participants through the use of gaze distance and modality.

Gaze

Gaze addresses the manner at which the participants look at the viewers. In cases where the participant in the visual text looks directly into the viewer’s eyes, a demand gaze is formed. The participant in image 1 can be classified as a “demand” showing that the producer uses the image to do something to the viewer. It is for this reason that Kress and Leeuwen (2006:123) call this kind of image “demand”: the participants gaze (and the gesture, if present) demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relations with him or her. From the serious look on the model’s face, it demands that the drink is for only mature and serious minded men.

Social Distance

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose that using the size of a frame can be utilized to convey a sense of social closeness between the participants and the viewers. These social relations are realized by varying the ‘size of frame’ throughout the use of close-up shots (showing head and shoulders of the subject), medium shots (displaying the body of the represented participant approximately down to the knees), and long shots (the whole figure occupies about half the height of the frame). Regarding the social distance, a medium shot is created in which the body of the man is depicted from the waist

upwards, hence, this is considered a **close social distance** between the viewer and the represented participant.

Angle

From the horizontal angle perspective, the represented participant is photographed at a **frontal angle** since the participant is captured at a face-to-face angle. Consequently, this shows a level of involvement with the participant and his world. Vertically, the represented participant is seen at eye-level by the viewer indicating a relation of equality between the viewer and the represented participant.

Compositional meaning

The compositional meaning is that aspect of the visual text that connects the representational function and the interpersonal function of the visual image to each other through three major associated principles: information value, framing and salience. In the advertisement above, salience remains the key compositional element employed and it helps in the interpretation of the messages embedded in the advertisement. Basically, salience identifies the elements that are distinct in the construction of any image or visual text. The main focus of salience is to identify the elements in the image that are more pronounced or foregrounded in the visual than the rest.

In the Bullet advertisement, the elements that stand out are the human figure and the can of Bullet energy drink. These elements share equal level of attention. The human presence is that of a particular Nigerian musician - Flavour. He is bare chested and this helps to highlight his physique. Right beside him is a can of the energy drink. The creators of the advertisement present the images in this manner in order to draw the attention of the viewers to the flier and more especially the foregrounded elements. At the first instance viewers will be drawn to the well-built Nigerian musician and celebrity, having a can of bullet drink beside him will further build a level of assurance on the product.

Image Two



Interpersonal meaning

Gaze

Image 2 is a flier of the Supakomando energy drink. In the image, the gaze is directed at the viewer and this kind of gaze is known as demand (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2005), so this is a demand image. Van Leeuwen (2005) states that when people are captured looking directly at the viewer, they address us directly with their looks, they articulate a kind of visual 'you', a symbolic demand. This kind of image demands something from the viewers, and these demands are often revealed by the linguistic elements accompanying the image, facial expressions, gestures and angle of the image. From the linguistic elements accompanying the text, the study derives the fact that this image of a celebrity on-air presenter calls on the viewers to identify with the brand through his gestures. The written text "Fire On" further collaborates the facial expression of the human figure. He urges the viewers to keep their energy fired up with the energy drink.

For the **social distance**, a close shot is identified. Objects or images captured from the chest upwards are categorized as **close – shot**. Images taken at close shot signify an intimate or friendly relationship, in this case, the producers of the advertisement flier intentionally adopted this shot in order to build a level of friendship or closeness with the viewers so as to get their patronage.

Regarding the **angle**, the represented participants are projected in **frontal angle** from the horizontal perspective. Images projected at frontal angle are realized when the images are captured face-to-face, such angles indicate a sense of involvement with the viewers (Machin, 2007). From the vertical plane, an eye-level angle is employed suggesting a level of equality with the viewers.

Compositional Meaning

Salience

In terms of the compositional structure, **salience** is evident through the participants place in the foreground. From the visual text, the human presence and the bottle of Supakomando energy drink are more salient and stand out than any other visual element in the text. Salience as a socio-semiotic resource is employed in visual texts to generate more attention to the product on display. Salience is further identified in the in the unequal sizes of the written texts. "FIRE ON" appears more prominent than the rest of the written texts SUPAKOMANDO ENERGY DRINK. The bolder fonts are intentionally written in order to provide a new set of information (New) while lesser fonts are carriers of an existing information (given).

Viewers are aware of the energy drink brand, however, the given information is that it sustains the energy to "fire on". The ideology behind the composition is to invite the viewer and other prospective consumers of the product to explore something new about a seemingly old product. This is a semiotic form of construing ideation and interpersonal relationships between the product and its viewers.

Framing

In terms of **framing**, the images and the words are placed in a black background with an illuminated green blend which is in contrast with the rest of the visual elements, thereby making the images, the words, and the visual layout to cohere in a striking manner. Again, the black and green colour, which is the official colour of the brand, serves as the background of the billboard advertisement, thereby, performing the communicative function as an identity marker.

Discussion of Findings

The advertisements under study shows that advertisers use different linguistic tools like represented participants, verbal texts, symbols, prominence, saliency, gaze, framing, slogans, catchy headlines, power and ideology to pass information to viewers and potential consumers. Through the images of carefully selected models, the consumption of the energy drinks is presented as a solution to regaining lost energy or building more energy. The energy drinks give promises to obtain perfect looking participants as they are attractive (strong), happy and satisfied. Cook (2001) points out that the function of advertisements is to inform, persuade, remind, influence and perhaps change opinions, emotions and attitude.

Conclusion

Although the energy drink advertisements are made very attractive and convey beautiful messages, they also could be very deceptive and create a misleading impression that if consumers purchase the different products, they will get the energy of looks, hence featuring models with well-structured bodies makes this impression easily attainable. From a Critical Discourse perspective, it is crucial that the male bodies are presented as commodities in the advertisements. Furthermore, the advertisers use young people which can be seen as the power young people hold in inviting their peers in consuming the product. The advertisers equally use slim but well-built men as Fairclough argues using people with good bodies holds the ideology of beauty (Fairclough, 2002).

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