

# Design semiotics assignment



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Following the reading of *The Handbook of Visual Analysis* (Lenten, Kiewit 2004) it is hypothesized that the meaning of mobile phone advertisements has become much more subjective in the 21st Century. This research essay will explore the different variables associated with each advertisement and compare each image to discover a trend and use this trend to better understand the principals of design.

## 2. 0 Discussion of Theory

### 2. 1 Semiotic Theory

Semiotic Theory is used to describe the relationship between a sign, an object, and a meaning. According to Morris (1964) people are interpreters of signs.

Human action involves signs and meanings in three different ways: the perception stage, the manipulation stage and the consummation stage. The perception stage refers to when the person becomes aware of the sign. When a person interprets the sign and decides how to respond to it is known as the manipulation stage. And finally, the consummation stage is when the person responds. As Linger (1972) states, “ symbols [signs] are vehicles for the conception of objects” meaning that without them, it would be harder to interpret objects and images.

Signs can be visually based such as drawings; paintings, photographs or they can also include words, sound and body language. Semiotics is a field of study involving various theoretical stances and methodological tools. It involves the study of not only what we consider ‘ signs’ but also anything which stands for’ something else.

## 2. 2 Content Analysis

Rose refers to the method of content analysis being based on “ counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analyzing those frequencies” (2001).

It was originally developed to interpret written and spoken texts by following a number of rules and procedures in order for the analysis to be reliable. An argument of quantitative versus qualitative information comes into play when researchers argue that in order to make the content analysis reliable, quantitative research must be undergone to reach a trustworthy medium. While others insist that content analysis is a way of understanding the symbolic qualities of texts.

### 3. Methodology

With an in-depth understanding of these visual communication theories, a specific code is developed and used to withdraw information from each image and compare the results to one another in order to provide content analysis on the group of images. These ‘codes’ of semiotic systems conceived of a set of rules for connecting signs and meanings. This is so if two or more people have mastered the same code, it was realized that they would be able to associate the same meanings to the same images – hence the code would be reliable.

In the topic of mobile phone advertisements, a specific code was created in order to identify any changes or patterns that occurred over the time period of 20 years. In order to develop this code, each image was deconstructed using a social semiotic analysis (Lenten, Kiewit 2004). The code used for these particular set of images included contact, information value, salience and modality. Contact can be described using two main criteria: demand and offer. If an image is a ‘demand’ image, it is associated with the objects in the image ‘making contact’ with the viewer and establishing a relationship with them.

However, an ‘offer’ image is associated with being impersonal where the viewer simply observes what is in the image without making a connection

with it. Information value refers to the placement of the elements within the composition. For example, where the mobile phone is positioned in the advertisement. This gives an insight as to what the image is trying to convey, as different placements are associated with different meanings. The idea of this is that the role of an element in a picture will depend on whether it is placed on the left, right or centre of the image.

An element being placed on the left is often associated with being a ‘given’, meaning that what is being presented, the viewer already knows. An object placed on the right of the page is associated with presenting ‘new information to the viewer. And therefore elements placed centered in the image are seen as what holds the ‘marginal’ information together. Saliency describes the focal point in the image and what is used to bring focal to the main element. Methods such as color, placement, foregrounding and size are used to attention the viewer to a specific part of the image.

The final code being evaluated in these advertisements will be modality. “The greater the congruence between what you see of an object in an image and what you can see of it in reality with the naked eye, in a specific situation and from a specific angle, the higher the modality of that image” (Lenten, Kiewit 2004 24). Therefore as soon as an image displays greater color saturation, more sharpness or begins to look ‘more than real’, its modality decreases. 4. 0 Results

After analyzing four different images from each century, a clear pattern emerged and significant changes can be seen as to how mobile phones are depicted now compared to 30 years ago. The results are shown below: 4. 1

1983-90 Results elements the viewer could connect with such as a person.

The left placement of the object within the frame suggests that the phone is a 'given' meaning viewers are already associated with the object. Following the rules of information value, 'new information to the viewer is to be placed on the right of the page.

This infers that the text is new information and more important than the image of the phone. The size of the text compared to the phone also focuses the viewer's attention directly to the text, leading it to be the focal point. As previously mentioned, the high contrast and shadows surrounding the phone leave the image to be of low modality. It creates more of a fantasy within the image resulting in communicating to the viewer that the mobile phone is 'higher than reality. Figure 2.0 is also an 'offer' image however it has the ability to connect with the viewer more so than figure 1. Because of the hand appearing in the image. The placement of the phone on the right hand side signifies that it's 'new information. As opposed to figure 1.0, the advertisement is introducing the phone as new information and the brand (text) to be information that viewers are already associated with. Based on this information it could be said that the phone is the main focal of the advertisement due to the larger scale of size compared to the text. However upon bringing into attention is first noted.

The low modality of the image is caused by the 'black and white' effect that also further enhances the red accent in the text. Being that the accent is a red cross brings positivist to the image. However the red cross can be seen differently by different cultures, for example, it can be seen as a health based issue which may put viewers off from buying the phone as they could

associate the symbol with that of a hospital. Others could see the cross as a protection symbol as defined by Hooray (2005) in Article 7 of the Geneva Convention. Upon analyzing figure 3. It can be seen that the image is very impersonal and does not connect with the viewer therefore it is an 'offer' image. The centre placement of the mobile suggests that it is the object tying all of the other information on the page together I. E. Thou the image of the phone; the text would not make sense. By using size as a salience, attention is first drawn to the phone that results in it being the most important part of the image. This is effective in the sense that the viewer's attention is being focused on the physicality of the phone and it's appearance rather than the functions stated in the text next to it.

The feet and hair prevailing outside of the phone lower the sense of realism and cause the image to be of low modality, as you would not expect the phone to have feet and hair when viewed in reality. As the figure has it's back turned therefore making it an 'offer' image. All of the important elements of the image are located on the centre and right side of the frame. The phone being placed on the right presents it as 'new information to the viewer because the phone is seen as 'reborn' with a new personalized feature. There is no clear focal point in the image because it has many elements going at once.

However the white text juxtaposed with the green background is where the viewer's attention is likely to be focused first. The viewer's eyes are then directed up the oblique angle of the phone and towards the brand name, making it the second focal point of the image. The green hue of the image decreases the modality making it less like reality. 4. 2 2007-13 Results

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advertisement for the Razz mobile. Different from the 20th century, advertisements now popularly feature people to develop more of a personal connection to the viewer. This makes it a ‘demand’ image.

Having eye contact with the figure greatly enhances the personal connection with the advertisements and leaves viewers being able to relate with the person and therefore position themselves being seen with the phone. While text is situated on the right-hand side being presented as ‘new information, the woman is centered which portrays her as tying all information together’. The whole image conveys a gold hue that contrasts with the woman’s blue eyes, making them the focal point. The direction of the eyebrows forces the viewers eyes down the length of the nose and focus on the phone situated in the foreground.

This image is of medium modality due to the realistic photographic appearance of the woman and natural hue. However the luminescent glow in the background and unnatural lighting lead the modality to be lowered from high to medium. As ‘demand’ due to the enticing pose leading viewers to personalize themselves with the image. All elements of the image are placed in the centre of the frame portraying how the consumer is equal to the product while emphasis is put on the mobile by the use of color to entice the viewer’s attention.

However the phone being foreground puts more emphasis on the object, depicting how it will enhance the viewer’s image if bought. The black and white filter placed over the woman as well as the highly contrasted lighting makes her of low modality. Whereas the phone balances the image by being

more realistic which can portray it as bringing ‘balance’ into the viewer’s life. The viewer feeling connected with the image. The open mouth also makes the face more friendly and approachable which could be associated with reflecting the brand name of the phone. Like figure 5. , all elements of the image are centered, resulting in an equality of all information in the image. However the foregrounding of the phone leads it to be the focal point of the image that is where viewer’s attention is first drawn. Also like figure 5. 0, the black and white filter leads the images modality to be lower than that of a realistic colored photo. The shadows are also highly contrasted round the hands and facial feature, giving the image a very edgy feel. Extremely strong connection to the viewer due to the point-of-view of the camera angle.

The angle of the image leads viewers to believe they are the one sitting in the driver’s seat that the girl is taking a photo of. This placement personalizes the experience for the viewer giving a sense of comfort to the image. The viewer’s feel like they can relate to the image therefore relate to the product. The placement of the text on the left-hand side of the image meaning that it is ‘given’ information is cause people are already associated with apple products and they usually know what to expect from the brand.

However the image of the actual product is what changes each time they release a new upgrade to the phone therefore it is situated on the right-hand side of the image because it is ‘new information. The fact that the girl is holding the phone in front of her face foregrounds it and focuses the viewers attention on the object. Given the extremely high modality of the image, this



needed to be done by a specific composition using the body language of the girl where her hands also frame the product.