

## NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN PRINT ADS

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**Abstract:** The starting point of the present paper is the observation that the message in print advertisements is realized not only verbally but also pictorially. The study of various women's glossy magazines has shown that most advertisements make extensive use of pictures to convey the message. Moreover, meaning is often communicated nonverbally through paralanguage. This paper focuses on the way in which print advertisements communicate meaning through images and paralanguage.

**Keywords:** print ads, nonverbal communication, images, iconic pictures, indexical pictures, paralanguage

### 1. Introduction

Browsing through a vast array of both Romanian and British women's glossy magazines (e.g. *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Marie Claire*, *Beau Monde*) we can not help noticing the overwhelming presence of illustrations. It would be a rather time-consuming activity to find a page that only contains text. This trend is accounted for by the significant shift towards visual forms of communication that our mass-mediated world has been experiencing lately. Humanity seems to have acquired a new dimension in which images have a primordial role in the creation of meaning and therefore, in communication. Visual communication has become a language, with a grammar of its own, which is spoken wherever Western culture is dominant (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). We have come to know and sense much of the world as a series of images which sometimes seem more appealing or even more real than that which they depict (e.g. Disney land, reality shows, pictures of places, things or people, etc.).

Many scholars have pointed out that advertising has quickly found its place into this new dimension by relying more and more on pictorial information. The fact that we could not find any advertisement that did not contain pictures within the pages of the above-mentioned magazines is a case in point. We have noticed that pictures form an important part of the overall message of print ads and that is why we believe that a closer look at the role they play in the communication of meaning in advertising becomes more than necessary. Moreover, in line with Cook (1992), we view print ads as discourse, i.e. text and context together, and as such, paralanguage is another important nonverbal element in an ad that is exploited for communicative purposes. Consequently, in the second part of the paper we shall focus on the way in which meaning in print ads is communicated through the exploitation of the paralanguage of both pictures and writing.

## 2. Pictures in print ads

As already stated, advertising pictures have increased considerably in importance. As a result, they have also increased in size, sometimes taking up nearly all the editing space in a single- or double-spread ad, at the expense of text (i.e. headline and body copy). Mainly because most people only spend 1.5 seconds on average to read a print advertisement (Brierley 2002: 178), copywriters have realized that they can get the message across much more easily and effectively if they resort to illustrations more: they take less effort to “read” and they have a greater and more rapid impact. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 33) remark, this trend towards increasing visualization can also be observed in other text types, such as newspapers (especially in front pages) and school textbooks.

Drawing on semiotics, we argue that most of the advertising pictures present in women’s glossy magazines are iconic since they depict the advertised product. Pictures showing a wide variety of goods, ranging from cosmetic products, washing powder and food to watches and cars, abound in the ads placed in these glossy magazines. The number of ads that do not depict the product iconically is rather insignificant, and this is mainly due to the increased referential potential of iconic illustrations, i.e. their power to convey basic information about goods (e.g. shape, design, colour, maybe brand name, product name, essential ingredients that are written on the product, etc.) to more people and much faster than text, on the one hand, and in a more appealing manner, on the other. We have noticed that in order to use the information potential of pictures most effectively, advertisers choose to depict the product at close or middle distance, in full, and facing the reader (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 134), with the exception of ads for products where design is an essential element, such as cars and watches, which are usually illustrated from a certain angle.

Magazine readers are exposed to these iconic pictures in ads whether they want it or not. The pictures simply stand out and enhance familiarity with the advertised product whether one only wishes to browse through a magazine without stopping to read the whole ad, or to intentionally skip the pages containing ads. However, no matter how appealing to the eye, these iconic signs used to introduce the promoted product into the world of the reader are not enough to arouse a sense of possession in the readers and turn them into potential consumers. Compared to their information potential, these iconic pictures of the product have rather low persuasive potential and consequently, advertisers must find a way to somehow differentiate the commodity they promote from competing ones. That is why most of the advertisements in women’s glossy magazines depict the advertised product either as part of a broader picture or next to another picture in which various other visual signs, which may seem not to have much in common with the product at first glance, are meant to function as indices for that product. As a result, commodities in ads are endowed with certain - needless to say - always positive characteristics, and thus undergo transformation from mere commodities to highly desirable ones. This “aestheticization” process (cf. Verergaard and Schroeder 1985) is consistent with the traditional AIDA model, which stands for Attention, Interest, Desire and Action (Brierley 2002).

One example that clearly illustrates how this process of metaphorical resignification works lies in the answer to the following question: what do a young, slim, long black-haired, scantily dressed woman whose body posture is similar to a tiger ready for attack, and a bottle of perfume with the name on it have in common? Not much, if only they weren't on the same page of a *Cosmopolitan* magazine, as parts of an ad for perfume. On a connotational level, the woman in the ad signifies beauty, health, sensuality and aggressiveness. By placing this "rich" sign next to the iconic illustration of the perfume bottle, the ad aims to transfer the qualities signified by the woman to the perfume, thus creating a new metaphorical sign in which the perfume itself is exotic sensuality. We have noticed that nearly all ads for perfume rely solely on nonverbal communication in order to transmit the advertising message. This technique is also favoured in this particular case due to the fact it would be very difficult (if not impossible) to describe perfume, i.e. smell, in words. Another observation is that all perfume ads contain iconic pictures of women and that the indexical transfer from these pictures to that of the perfume always involves a lesser or a greater degree of sensuality, ranging from innocent sensuality to provocative, overt sexual attitudes.

It is interesting to notice the way in which and the extent to which the female body is exploited for advertising purposes. Besides perfume ads, an overwhelming number of advertisements for cosmetic products, which make up 90 percent of the ads in women's glossy magazines, contain pictures of women. The purpose of these pictures in ads is twofold. On the one hand, female bodies or only various parts of them play a functional role: they are used as props that help demonstrate the results of usage of a certain product. Pictures of smooth, firm-skinned legs in ads for anti-cellulite creams or razors, of tanned bodies for tanning lotions, of long, silky, shiny hair for shampoos and conditioners, of curved pitch-black eyelashes for mascara, and of coloured lips and painted nails for lipstick and nail polish, respectively, are just some examples that show the result one can arrive at thanks to the advertised products. Moreover, the female body as prop is also used to illustrate the product in actual use, but such examples are by far less numerous: a picture of a woman's hands getting ready to apply an Olay facial cleansing cloth, of a woman washing her upper body (which is covered in foam) with Aveeno body wash, or shaving her legs with a Gillette razor. However, depictions of women in ads are hardly ever restricted to their functional role. Just like in the case of perfume ads, these pictures also have a signifying role: not only do they denote a particular person (be she a celebrity or a model), but they also carry connotations such as youth, slimness, health and sensuality which are highly valued in our culture. By placing together the picture of a woman signifying feminine beauty and that of the cosmetic product, advertisers actually open the way for an indexical transfer from the former onto the latter. In other words, all these positive connotations are carried over onto the advertised product and consequently, women are promised to buy beauty itself together with the product. Images depicting female characters are so widely used in ads primarily because they function as the magic mirror reflection of an embodied perfect self. They invite women to see an improved version of themselves, what they could become if, of course, they used the advertised product. Women are thus promised the fulfillment of a major social need: to become as appealing to other people as the characters in the advertisements.

Besides female bodies, object props also abound in print advertisements. In an ad for Olay moisturizing wash, for instance, the fluffy towel wrapped around a woman's body is an index for the softness of her skin as a result of using the product. Another example is an ad for VO5 hair treatment that shows a woman proudly holding a statuette award similar to the Oscar, which suggests, of course the product's professionally recognized excellence. As Dyer (1992: 105) explains, object props can be both signifying and functional at the same time: if coffee is shown in a coffee cup, the prop is there for mere functional reasons. But if the readers can identify the cup as some high-quality piece of crockery, this serves as both a functional and a metaphorical prop in the ad; connotations of good taste and superior quality are thus projected onto the coffee itself.

Settings are also carriers of meaning in print ads. For example, an ad for Olay complete moisturizer shows the product next to a slice-of-life kind of setting: a woman is sitting on a fluffy white carpet in her living room, happily holding and looking at a baby (probably hers, since they are both Oriental-looking). She is leaning against a low piece of furniture on which we can see a notebook and some sheets of paper, and right next to her, on the floor, there is an open laptop and a newspaper. Everything that surrounds her indicates that she has it all: the carpet stands for comfort, the laptop, the notebook and the paper suggest that she is a career-woman, the open newspaper that she keeps informed, and the toddler that she is a mother. The obvious implication is that the Olay complete moisturizer is as "complete" (i.e. it has all the ingredients) for the skin as her life, on the one hand, and that the product might be the key to such a full, happy life, on the other. The subtle choreography of visual signs in this ad actually places an equality sign between the product and a fulfilled life. Again, women are sold more than a mere product: they are sold an image of themselves in a much more attractive persona.

Similarly, an ad for Tone Cocoa Butter hand and body wash products also exploits the communicative potential of settings. However, it does so in a somehow different, less complex manner since there are fewer visual elements and no characters in the ad. This time the reader is offered a close-up image of an artificial outdoor setting; more precisely, a rather blurred close-up of a piece of tropical nature that partially depicts a broken coconut and an exotic red flower, both placed on a coconut palm leaf. The focus of the ad is on the product - a bar of soap with the brand-name carved on it - which has been inserted into the picture between the flower and the coconut, as if it were another natural element. The image of the advertised product has been integrated into the image of a misty tropical setting reminiscent of the rainforest (also known as "the world's largest pharmacy"), which thus leads to a semiotic transfer: the positive connotations of the latter "rub off" onto the product itself. As a result, The Tone Soap can be perceived at a glance as highly beneficial to the skin (since it is natural, i.e. it contains natural extracts from the Tropics), having a lush, exotic and misty fragrance. Moreover, the presence of one particular visual prop - the broken coconut - makes the product gain further positive characteristics, such as hydrating and softening. Buying the product is buying the pleasure of such qualities.

Such adverts in which the product is depicted in an unusual setting are similar to those ads analyzed by the Dutch linguist Charles Forceville (WWW, Lecture 2 and 3)

that convey the advertising message by means of a pictorial metaphor of the contextual type (formerly referred to as MP1 in Forceville 1996). One such example is a print ad for Lucky Strike cigarettes, in which a packet of cigarettes is shown in a soap dish (where one would normally expect to see a bar of soap), within the larger context of a bathroom. In both ads the semiotic metaphorical transfer occurs from the source, i.e. *natural element* in our example and *bar of soap* in Forceville's, to the target, i.e. the product: the Tone soap and the packet of Lucky Strike cigarettes, respectively. Moreover, neither source is visually present in the ads; they are only suggested by the pictorial context. The only difference concerns the suggestive force of the setting: while our example allows one to infer a rather vague source (*natural element*), that of Forceville allows a very precise identification (*bar of soap*).

Another nonverbal advertising technique is to depict the advertised product in a somewhat altered way, so as to forcefully suggest something else. Therefore, the reader perceives an image of something that simultaneously represents two things. In other words, two completely different things merge to form a single (however impossible in reality) gestalt. For example, in an ad for VO5 Styling Gels, there are four such products shown on the page, in different colours, all of them closely resembling ice-cream lollies due to the wooden sticks used as a handle to hold each gel bottle. Just like in the ad for Tone Cocoa Butter hand and body wash products discussed above, both the product and the ice lolly (which is metonymically represented by the stick), are perceived as a single unit in which the former acquires various qualities from the ice-cream, such as pleasant and refreshing fragrance (there is a shift in the senses from taste to smell), strong hold and indulgence of use. One more example that illustrates this technique is provided by an ad for Geox shoes, in which one of the shoes in the pair shown in the ad is strongly reminiscent of an iron, due to the steam coming off the small wholes in its sole. The picture of the "shoe-iron" suggests that the shoe functions like an iron, letting the heat off when overheated (the steam in the ad stands for the foot perspiration) thus keeping the feet dry. Again, these examples are very similar to what Forceville refers to as hybrid pictorial metaphors in print advertising (WWW, Lecture 2 and 3, formerly referred to as MP2 in Forceville 1996). However, the ads he examines are slightly different, in that the two objects forming one unified entity are both only partly represented (i.e. somehow deformed), whereas in our examples one of the objects - that depicting the advertised product - is shown in its entirety while a part of the other is added to it. We believe that the advertisers have chosen to depict the advertised products undistorted in shape for fear that readers might otherwise perceive it as impaired or damaged.

### 3. Paralanguage in print ads

We have already drawn attention to the fact that print advertisements in women's glossy magazines make extensive use of images depicting female characters. Moreover, we have argued that these images provide the locus of identification with "the ideal us". As such, it is important that we also pay some attention to these images from a paralinguistic perspective. More precisely, what do the paralinguistic features of the female characters present in ads communicate about the "ideal us" we are invited to identify with? As far as appearance is concerned, it

does not take too much to provide an answer. Irrespective of whether the focus of the picture is on the whole body or only on a certain part (hair, face, lips, eyes, legs, etc.), the characteristics of the perfect self are the same. All the women depicted in advertisements proudly display their slim bodies, as if the body comes naturally in one universal S size. The skin is smooth, even (and, if possible, tanned), with emphasis on the face, which has no lines, wrinkles, spots or any other usual blemishes. Lips are full; eyelashes are long, thick and curved. Moreover, hair is always shiny, silky and most often, long, while eyes are bright, without showing any signs of fatigue. All these examples of paralinguistic features function as indices of what our culture has defined "feminine beauty".

Pose is another important carrier of meaning in print advertisements. Women in ads are shown adopting various poses, depending on the particular message the ad tries to send. We think that two of the ads discussed in the first part of the paper, namely that for perfume and that for Olay complete moisturizer, provide clear examples of different poses: an aggressively seductive one in the former, and a relaxed, maternal one in the latter. Besides being merely functional (e.g. holding a lipstick in order to use it in an ad for lipstick), the activity of women's hands may also signify. For example, in an ad for fake French nails we are shown a close-up picture of a relaxed, smiling couple lying on the floor, with the focus on her left hand delicately resting on his right shoulder. The particular position of her manicured hand suggests possession and the obvious implication is that not only does using the product mean possession of beautiful nails, but also of a handsome partner. Another example is the act of touching one's body, as for instance in an ad for Herbal Essences hair products where the woman character is portrayed passing her hand through her hair, or in a number of ads for body wash products where the women are gently touching their bodies during or after the bath. These gestures signify narcissistic pleasure and invite to admiration.

In addition, the face and the facial expression of the female characters depicted in print ads form a significant element of paralanguage. Just like in the case of body posture, the women in print ads display a wide array of facial expressions, which are "meant to underwrite the appeal of a product and arouse our emotions" (Dyer 1992: 99). The two most important signifiers seem to be the eyes and the mouth. Concerning the latter, we have noticed that most female characters in ads (with very few exceptions) are smiling. According to the strength of the feeling it signals, the smile can range from a slight upward curving of the lips to a broad grin.

It is interesting to notice that many of the paralinguistic phenomena present in print advertisements confirm Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996: 14) theory on the interpersonal function of visual design. Indeed, pictures of women are used in print ads in order to establish a social relationship between the depicted female character and the viewer. We have noticed that an overwhelming number of characters in ads look the viewers in the eye, establishing contact. As a visual form of direct address, such a gaze acknowledges viewers explicitly, inviting them to enter into the world of the ad and initiating some kind of social relationship (cf. Cook 1992: 177-179, Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 121-125). The precise nature of this relationship is signaled by other paralinguistic elements: eye contact and a smile, for example, initiate a relation of

social affinity. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 122) note that this visual form of direct address may be reinforced by a gesture in the direction of the viewer. However, we have not encountered any example in this respect. Instead, we have found a few ads where the character is depicted as if offering the advertised product to the viewer, i.e. the arms stretched towards the viewer and the product held in (open) hand. One such example is an ad for Nestle hot chocolate. Here, the use of a man to make the offer simulates an even closer relation between the male character (and thus the ad) and the female viewer, due to its romantic overtones.

Moreover, following Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996: 130-135) connection between the size of a picture's frame and the proxemics of social interaction, we observe that many ads portray the characters in close-up or in medium close shot. This particular kind of framing places the characters very close to the viewers (i.e., as close as friends are), creating an atmosphere of proximity and intimacy.

Not only are women (visually) addressed as good friends. More than that, the female characters in ads sometimes literally look down on the viewers, assuming a superior position, the role of an older, wiser sister who has all the right answers. This effect is achieved by depicting characters from a low angle (ibid. 147). In the few instances where a male character is used, as in the Nestle ad above, the effect of authority and power is even stronger.

Although much less exploited by advertisers, the paralanguage of writing seems to be equally important for strengthening the addresser-addressee bond. This time, personal interaction is simulated through the use of handwritten text. A case in point is an ad for Cappy orange juice that uses black handwriting instead of typewritten characters to make the message more private and uniquely personal. Its effect is even stronger due to the fact that it is shown on a classic, yellow Post-it note. On the other hand, the paralanguage of writing is often used to attract attention and to make the ad stand out. Advertisers draw on various kinds of typeface, ranging from blurred, scribbled and stylized to three-dimensional letters. Moreover, the shape of letters may signify beyond the linguistic sign they realize. For example, in an ad for FDS deodorant spray the qualities of the product (e.g. gentle and relaxing) are also indexically suggested by very neat, rounded, smooth-edged and looped lettering. Cook (1992: 78-81) also discusses iconicity with words and exemplifies how the particular arrangement of words in a piece of text can function as an iconic sign (e.g. two sloping lines signifying a roof in a coffee ad; the shape of the entire copy signifying a perfume bottle in an ad for perfume). Consequently, the surface form of the linguistic message has great signifying potential and has become integral to the overall effect of a print ad.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Our analysis of print ads in women's glossy magazines is an attempt at emphasizing the extent to which communication within this genre is achieved through nonverbal means. More than 10 years ago Kress and van Leeuwen wrote that "The place of language in public forms of communication is changing. Language is moving from its former, unchallenged role as *the* medium of communication, to a role as one medium of communication [...]" (1996: 34). We believe that our paper, far from being exhaustive, has managed to validate their observation. Nowadays, print

advertisements definitely convey a heavy proportion of their meaning visually, with only a small proportion of the page allotted to language (i.e. text). More specifically, an overwhelming number of print ads rely primarily on iconic pictures of the promoted product in order to introduce the product and to make it familiar to the viewer at a mere glance. However, despite their information potential, such pictures are not powerful enough to turn viewers into potential consumers. That is why print ads almost always contain various other indexical visual signs whose role is to metaphorically resignify the product and thus play upon the viewer's heartstrings. As discussed in the second part of the paper, a wide range of props and settings are engaged in this metaphorical resignification process in order to make the ad more appealing to the eye, on the one hand, and its message soul-stirring, on the other. Due to their strong signifying potential, the advertised product is endowed with all sorts of qualities that are highly-valued in our society and that women will not have the pleasure of experiencing unless they change their attitude from passive viewers to active consumers. One such prop, almost obsessively used in print ads, is the female body. This particular prop has an important advantage over object props: it both simulates social interaction and offers women a mirror reflection of an improved self that can only be achieved through consumption.

As shown in the third part of the paper, the paralinguistic features of the female characters present in ads (e.g. appearance, pose, facial expression) are paramount nonverbal carriers of meaning. While pose may vary greatly according to the particular message the ad wants to send, appearance leaves no doubt about the contemporary concept of "feminine beauty" (young, slim, firm, smooth-skinned, hair-free, tanned, fully-lipped, etc.). Similarly, as far as facial expression is concerned, the smile and the direct eye contact are the most commonly used signifiers, mainly because they manage to bridge the gap between the world of the ad to that of the viewers. The same effect, among many others, can be achieved through the exploitation of the paralanguage of writing (e.g. handwriting instead of typing).

We can conclude that visual signs seem to be the essence of communication in print ads since they offer information about commodities, create mood, interact with the viewers and persuade. We believe that this paper has proven that overlooking the nonverbal elements in print advertisements, i.e. pictures and paralinguistic features, means missing much of the complexity of the advertising message.

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