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VISUAL CREATIVITY IN ADVERTISING: A FUNCTIONAL TYPOLOGY

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Abstract

There are many ways in which the visuals of an advertisement can be made "creative." In this article, we propose a new typology of visual creative ideas. The typology is functional in that the first type, literal product or user visuals, which are "noncreative" in the usual sense, gain selective attention, by a product category-involved audience. The other three types, in contrast, are "creative" and can force reflexive attention among low-involved audiences. These are called pure attention-getters, including the innate erotic, baby, and direct-gaze schemas, and the learned shock, celebrity, and culture-icon and subculture-icon schemas; distortional attention-getters, including distortions of object design, function, and relation; and visual conveyors, the last including brand awareness conveyors, functional benefit conveyors, and emotional benefit conveyors. In the presentation, we show print advertisements from around the world that exemplify the types.

Introduction

Visual creativity in advertising involves the use of unusual – and therefore surprising – pictures or, in the case of television advertising, pictorial sequences (Kroeber-Riel 1993; Rossiter 1994; Kover 1995). Benetton's advertisements are a well-known example of the use of very unusual pictures to surprise, even to shock, and attract attention to the brand. Absolut Vodka advertisements , featuring its distinctively-shaped bottle superimposed on everyday cultural objects, an idea recently extended to its TV commercials, are another example. While always important, visual creativity is becoming dominant in multinational and global advertising campaigns because picture interpretation is basically universal (Messaris 1997) whereas the interpretation of words, as in slogans and copy claims, is not.

However, despite the growing importance of visual creativity in advertising, there exists no comprehensive taxonomy of visual techniques that can be drawn upon to make an advertisement "creative," that is, unusual and surprising. Verbal creativity techniques have, on the other hand, been well classified (McQuarrie and Mick 1996).

Our purpose in this article is to make a parallel contribution for visual creativity techniques.

Our method is essentially expert content analysis, guided by advertising theory (Rossiter and Percy 1997). Also, we make use of several previous partial classifications, which are acknowledged, together with our original classifications.

Visual Creativity Typology

The typology identifies four broad types of visuals and their subtypes. The first type, which is necessary to make the typology of visuals exhaustive, is actually "noncreative" in the sense of not being unusual (to be unusual simply means to be statistically infrequent; e.g., Guilford 1950). However, the first type is functionally very important because this type – called literal product or user visuals – is perfectly adequate and effective when the target audience is known to be highly involved in the product or service category, and thus to exhibit selective attention.

The second, third, and fourth types of visuals are functionally different in that they are capable of eliciting attention among low-involved target audiences. They are all clearly "creative," that is, they are unusual and surprising. The second type of visuals – pure attention-getters – are moderately unusual. The third type of visuals – distorted attention-getters – are very unusual. The fourth type of visuals – visual conveyors – are also very unusual.

The four types of advertising visuals, and their subtypes, are defined and briefly discussed in this article. The presentation will show examples from various countries' print advertisements that fit the typology.

Literal product or user visuals

Advertisements that employ literal product or user visuals, which are iconic (realist) representations of the product or, for services especially, the user, do not have to rely on a visual creative device to stimulate attention. Instead, prospective customers who are already interested in the product or service category and are thus "high-involved" can be expected to pay selective attention, and any reasonably iconic representation of a product or a user of the service from the relevant category will suffice (Rossiter and Percy 1997). Target's "Toys" advertisement (slide 1) is a good example, in which the visual shows literal products and a literal user.

Pure attention-getters

Pure attention-getter visuals can employ either (a) innate (in-born) reflexive attention stimuli or (b) widely-learned reflexive attention stimuli. We identify four subtypes of innate attention-getters and five subtypes of learned attention-getters.

(a) Innate

(i) Erotic schema. The best-known innate erotic schema is a circle with a dot in the middle, symbolizing the mother's breast (Kroeber-Riel 1993). Shapely torsos, bottoms, and legs also appear to universally trigger sexual interest and this reaction could well be innate. The Infonet advertisement (slide 2) uses an erotic schema.

(ii) Baby schema. The baby schema might be thought to be naturally attention-getting more for women as potential or actual mothers. In fact, pictures of babies draw the attention of both genders, probably due to a natural instinct of nurturance (Kroeber-Riel 1993). The children's water safety public service advertisement by The Royal

Lifesaving Society of Australia, co-sponsored by Pfizer, makes use of the baby schema (slide 3).

(iii) Direct-gaze schema. Previously called the "eyes schema" (Kroeber-Riel 1993), a more accurate description of this innate attention-getting stimulus is the "direct-gaze schema" in that the eye or eyes should appear to be looking directly at you (Messaris 1997). The advertisement for 2000 Calorie Mascara (slide 4) illustrates the direct-gaze schema.

(iv) Danger-suspense schema. The danger-suspense schema is well known in classical art, where pictures of scenes that inspire awe are said to be "sublime" (Percy 1993). That the reaction is innate is known from the famous "glass tabletop" experiments with infants. The advertisement for Sealy mattresses, the slogan of which is "We support you night and day," uses the danger-suspense schema to elicit reflexive attention (slide 5).

(b) Learned

(i) Shock schema. As indicated by Lois (1991, p. 46), this tactic is often used when a copywriter wants to break the current standard of advertising in order to create shock value. For example in the 1960s, though it may seem hard to believe now, showing a bare foot in an advertisement was considered to be a taboo until George Lois himself, who was then an art director, broke the rule for a product that cured athlete's foot. A more recent (and now "classic") example is the initial advertisement for Benetton clothes (Miller 1991), which shows a picture of a newborn baby with its umbilical cord still attached. Nobody would have expected such a picture to be used in advertising. A more recent example is the Columbian advertisement using the shock of mastectomy to urge screening for breast cancer (slide 6).

(ii) Celebrity schema. Obviously learned but reliably attention-getting is the celebrity schema. The Longines watch advertisement featuring actress Audrey Hepburn is a classic example of the celebrity schema (slide 7).

(iii) Culture-icon schema. Culture-icon schemas, as the name indicates, are learned attention-getting stimuli that have strong emotional relevance to the members of a particular culture (Kroeber-Riel 1993). Just as we have Aussie icons such as stubbies (the beer bottles), the rock (Ayers Rock), and the Okker character, which do not have much meaning elsewhere in the world, so do other cultures have their iconic cultural images. An advertisement for Underberg, a German digestive drink, uses a visual that draws on several Teutonic icons – the Aryan blonde maiden, mountains, water, and spring flowers (slide 8).

(iv) Subculture-icon schema. All cultures contain subcultural groups, which may cut across cultures, who often develop their own iconic symbols that have special meaning for the in-group but not outside (Kroeber-Riel 1993). The Club Med advertisement (slide 9) employs a subculture-icon schema appealing to the snowboarder subculture. This visual secondarily employs the danger-suspense schema, but that is part and parcel of the snowboarding lifestyle.

Distortional attention-getters
Distortional attention-getting visuals elicit reflexive attention by departing from normal expectation in terms of (a) design, (b) function, (c) internal relations between objects in the pictures, or (d) external relations. Each has a number of subtypes, illustrated below.

(a) Design

(i) <u>Shape distortion</u>. When an object in a picture exhibits shape distortion, it means that the object's shape has been physically distorted beyond its normal limits. In the psychology of visual arts, Arnheim (1954, p. 124) discussed a related form of distortion called "projective violation," where representations of the same object from different angles are condensed as a single whole. He argued that this type of physical distortion is often seen in modern art (Picasso's Cubism painting style is a memorable case). The Shisheido cosmetics advertisement (slide 10) is an example of visual shape distortion.

(ii) <u>Color deviation</u>. Color deviation is a subtype of design distortion. The German advertisement for Beck's beer shows its trademark sailing ship with, unusually, green sails (slide 11). The green matches the "brand color" of Beck's and is probably intended also to assist brand recognition.

(iii) <u>Physical incompletion</u>. When an object in a picture exhibits physical incompletion, it means the object shown is not physically perfect, adequate, or whole. This is done by deliberately deleting or removing parts of what could be a complete or better whole. This is similar to what Goodwin (1980) has called "incompleteness," where aspects of the stimulus array are "unfinished not fully developed, or not having all the essential elements or parts" (p. 266). A quite striking example of physical incompletion is the advertisement for the German retailer, Salzgitter A.G. (slide 12).

(iv) <u>Line-drawing or cartoon</u>. Line-drawings or cartoons are effective and efficient visual communication devices, versus real pictures, for conveying information (Messaris 1997). This is especially the case where a real picture might generate unwanted negative affect. The advertisement for Quick Cleanse stomach medicine employs an attention-getting line-drawing (slide 13).

(v) <u>Visual parody</u>. A final subtype of design distortion is visual parody (Messaris 1997). A parodic rendering of Da Vinci's famous painting, The Mona Lisa, is employed in the newspaper advertisement by a Honda car dealership in Hornsby, N.S.W., Australia (slide 14).

(b) Function

(i) <u>Odd behavior</u>. When an object (usually an object, less often an animal species) in a picture exhibits odd behavior it means that it is depicting a person behaving in a way that is not normally expected or that is beyond the object's normal capabilities. The South American advertisement for Despegar air courier service (slide 15) illustrates the odd behavior tactic.

(ii) <u>Functional change</u>. When an object in the picture exhibits functional change, it means that the normal functions of the object have been changed, or extended to include new ones. In bizarre imagery research, Marshall, Nau and Chandler (1979) termed this "change in the function of one object." In creative thinking, Michalko (1991) called this "put to other uses." The advertisement for Sony television (slide 16) shows a pair of spectacles whose lenses are Sony TV sets.

(iii) <u>Anthropomorphism</u>. When an object in a picture exhibits anthropomorphism, it means that the object has been imbued with human or living qualities (e.g., being able to speak and run) so that it to possess a free will of its own. In bizarre imagery research, this tactic is called "giving human features or living features" (Marshall, et al. 1979). The advertisement for Van Cleef & Arpels jewelry shows the "dragonfly" items as flying onto the leaf.

(c) Relation – internal

(i) <u>Arrangement deviation</u>. When an object in a picture exhibits arrangement deviation, it means that there is a peculiar spatial arrangement of its pictorial elements in relation to each other. This incongruity is also akin to what is called "position violation" in the picture-recognition literature (Beiderman et al. 1982). In art psychology, it is termed the "orientation deviation" (Arnheim 1954, p. 82). In creative thinking, this is similar to what Michalko (1991) termed "rearrange." The advertisement for Siebel sales and marketing services, a division of Price Waterhouse Coopers, employs an unusual visual perspective to attract attention (slide 18).

(ii) <u>Object calligraphy</u>. When objects in a picture possesses object calligraphy, it means they represent writing, performing the additional function of imparting not just visual but also verbal information. In semiotics, Williamson (1985, p. 91) simply called this "calligraphy." Athletic shoes are arranged to form the Nike "swoosh," a tick, in writing, in the advertisement for this well-known brand (slide 19).

(iii) <u>Added detail</u>. Added detail – an interesting, unusual detail – is a visual attention-getting technique identified by Kroeber-Riel (1993). The advertisement for Magnum ice cream bars nicely illustrates the added detail technique for gaining attention (slide 20). Note that the sub-brand logo in the top-left corner is not supposed to be an added detail; Magnum, from Unilever, is marketed under several ice cream brand names in various countries.

(d) Relation – external

(i) <u>Size distortion</u>. When an object in a picture exhibits size distortion, it means that it contains pictorial elements whose size is disproportionately larger or smaller compared with the other elements in the picture. In the picture-recognition literature, Beiderman et al. (1982) termed this "size violation," while in imagery research Marshall, et al. (1979) called this "change in the size of one object." Mandler and Ritchey (1977) claim that size distortion of the target element must be at least 67% larger or smaller relative to normal before it becomes noticeable. In creative thinking, size distortion parallels Michalko's (1991) idea of magnifying or minifying. The advertisement for Mercure Hotels in Germany uses size distortion to imply that its business-equipped rooms are like taking a compact personal secretarial service with you (slide 21).

(ii) <u>Fusion</u>. When an object in picture exhibits fusion, it means that two or more pictorial elements have been merged or fused to form a single entity. Homer and Kahle (1986) termed this "hybridization," while in bizarre imagery research this tactic is called "incorporation of one object as the feature of another" (Marshall et al. 1979). In creative thinking, this parallels what Rothenberg (1981) called "homospatial thinking." Michalko (1991) simply termed this "combine." The advertisement for IBM's Thinkpad laptop computer fuses the computer onto a ski binding (slide 22). This advertisement secondarily employs a skiing symbol as a culture-icon for especially Northern European countries.

(iii) <u>Permeation</u>. When an object in a picture exhibits permeation, it means that some of its elements are depicted to pass through each other as if there were no physical barriers. This is quite similar to what Beiderman et al. (1982) in the picture-recognition literature called "interposition," where the background of a scene passes through an object in the scene. In art psychology, Arnheim (1954, p. 121) termed this "overlapping violation," where an object being blocked by another can still be seen, a common technique in modern art. The Corona beer ad, a beer often consumed with a piece of lime, illustrates the permeation tactic (slide 23).

(iv) <u>Support failure</u>. When an object in a picture exhibits support failure, it means that some of its elements are depicted to exist without any appropriate physical support, defying the laws of gravity. In the picture-recognition literature, Beiderman et al. (1982) termed this "support violation," while Hock, Romanski, Gale and Williams (1978) termed it "physical (im)possibility." With a nice play on the item's name, the advertisement for Clinique Anti-Gravity eye makeup remover cream illustrates support failure to gain attention (slide 24).

(v) <u>Redundancy</u>. Redundancy, also called visual alliteration or resonance (McQuarrie and Mick 1992), uses repetition of visual elements to increase attention by encouraging a "double take" glance at the picture. The advertisement for Balenciaga's Talisman perfume (slide 25) employs the visual redundancy technique.

(vi) <u>Contrast</u>. Visual contrast, another technique identified by McQuarrie and Mick (1992) heightens the disparity in the objects shown. The Technomarine wristwatch advertisement shows exactly how this tactic works (slide 26).

(vii) <u>Ultra close-up</u>. Ultra close-up photography has been theoretically located as an attention-getting technique by Messaris (1997). The advertisement for Ebel wristwatch, which shows (apparently) the wrist and hand of Harrison Ford, and thus vaguely uses the celebrity schema as well, depends for its effect on ultra close-up (slide 27).

(viii) <u>Subjective camera</u>. Subjective camera is another external relations visual technique identified in the insightful analysis by Messaris (1997), who is an expert in filmographic communications. In this technique, "someone," unseen, is evidently taking the photo, and it is evidently <u>you</u>, which makes the picture much more involving. The advertisement for Maurice La Croix women's wristwatches (slide 28) demonstrates the subjective camera technique.

Visual conveyors
Even for a visual that is relatively common in advertising, it is possible for that visual to be remote – unusual – in its association with the advertised <u>product</u>. Remoteness means that the object in the picture has a low probability of ecological co-occurrence with the advertised product, that is, the two never or very rarely would be associated in real life (Rossiter and Percy 1997). Beiderman, et al. (1982) call this phenomenon "probability violation"; Thorson and Friestad (1983) call it "product-scene (dis)integration"; while in the art genre known as Surrealism it is called the "provocation of accidental encounters" (Homer and Kahle 1986). In creative thinking, between-domain remoteness is related to Michalko's (1991) idea of "substitution," where one object is replaced by another. For a sophisticated application of the substitution principle in advertisement visuals, see Goldenberg and Mazursky (2002).
Visual conveyors can be used to (a) increase brand recognition, (b) dramatize a functional benefit (analogies and metaphors; Kroeber-Riel 1993), or (c) dramatize an emotional benefit. Space precludes discussion and illustration of this fourth type of visual creativity. For more on visual conveyors, see Rossiter (1994) and Rossiter and Percy (1997).

Theoretical And Applied Value Of The Visual Creativity Typology
Because the typology integrates all other techniques that can be found in the literature on picture recognition in psychology and visual appreciation in art, it represents the most complete taxonomy available and therefore makes a valuable theoretical

contribution. Empirically, we as expert judges found the classification of visuals in advertisements in terms of the theoretical types and subtypes to be highly reliable, although we realize that for nonexpert researchers, some coding guidelines should be provided. Also, as we noted, some advertisements employ more than one of the visual techniques, as is found with verbal techniques (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Note that we make no predictions, nor do we see any value in testing, which subtypes are more "effective" in advertisements . We expect that executional quality would far outweigh differences between them in effectiveness.

From an application's perspective, the new typology can serve as a "How-to" compendium for copywriters and art directors, or as a brainstorming tool to stimulate new visual advertising campaigns.

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