



Brand Semiotics as a Tool to Create Stronger Viewer Involvement with Brand Visuals on Social Media

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Abstract. This paper draws on a visual social semiotic analysis to illustrate how brand semiotics could be used as a social media marketing tool to select brand visuals that will attract attention and drive social conversations. Consumers nowadays access and interpret online brand messages differently due to social media and access to more technologies. While brands today have more visibility and can create and share brand messages on numerous social media platforms for a wider reach, the power has shifted to consumers. Because of more access to online information consumers can choose to either ignore or share and engage with a brand's messages. By analysing one brand visual that sparked many reactions on social media, it is demonstrated how stronger viewer involvement can be achieved with embedded signs and symbols with which the viewer can resonate. The findings demonstrate that it is important for social media marketers to develop the inner meaning of visuals by placing consumers in a specific visual relationship with the visual. In doing so, the paper addresses the paucity of research on the semiotics of brand visuals and also provides a heuristic for social media marketers how to consider signs and symbols embedded in visuals for more impact on social media.

Keywords: Brand message · Brand semiotics · Brand visual · Social media marketing · Visual semiotics

1 Introduction

In the digital age consumers have unprecedented access to online information and thus also have more knowledge about and access to brands (Campbell 2014). How a brand represents itself in digital spaces have thus become more important to connect emotionally with consumers (Vos 2019). As a result, social media marketers also use visual communication to convey brand information through brand imagery to have a greater visual impact (Kaulback 2018). While a brand cannot exist without product and services, a brand's signs and symbols (intangible aspects) have become increasingly important to connect with consumers in social media while having to compete with thousands of other brands. Tangible brand features such as product and services should thus not be the only considerations for a brand's social media strategy, but a brand should also signify

it's messaging using signs and/or symbols (Campbell 2014). Social media marketers cannot control how brand messaging is interpreted, but it is argued in this paper that a semiotics vocabulary could assist them to decode the meanings (cues) that resonate more with consumers (Olbertová 2018; Vos 2019). Many social media marketers nowadays use brand visuals to express the brand and to captivate consumers in social media as part of the brand's story (Ivanov 2017), but often neglect to consider the brand's signs and symbols to better connect with consumers. To address the paucity of research on the semiotics of resonating brand visuals, the study is driven by the following research question:

How can social media marketers create stronger viewer involvement with embedded signs and symbols in brand visuals?

The paper proceeds in several parts. The brand and visual brand messaging in social media are first discussed followed by a discussion of the semiotics of a brand as a tool for a brand's social media strategy. To answer the research question one brand visual that received much consumer engagement in social media is analysed by focusing on visual semiotics. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusions.

2 The Brand and Visual Brand Messaging on Social Media

Consumers nowadays are faced with an overload of brand messaging on social media and continually process visuals while forming opinions about a brand (Avery 2019). Consequently, the concept of a brand is dependent on interpretation by consumers and only exists when there are distinct ideas and meanings about the brand in their minds which are instilled with brand messaging (Campbell 2014). Numerous definitions of a brand are available in the academic literature covering different topics. In addition, brand experts define brands with different nuances (Kapferer 2012). A brand is thus not a predetermined concept but rather multidisciplinary with different perspectives across disciplines (Le Roux and Du Plessis 2014). For this paper, a definition of a brand is adopted as "a multidimensional construct that exists in a continuous process of cyclical communication between the actions of the firm and the interpretations and redefinitions of the consumers, through which the brand is imbued with certain values and expectations" (Yenicioglu and Christodoulides 2014, p. 269).

It is well-documented that successful brands connect with consumers on social media through brand stories that depict a powerful visual mental representation of the brand (Hong 2016; Perreira 2019). These brand stories are driven by social word of mouth (viral marketing on social media) to extend the reach of social conversations around a brand's story (Hajli et al. 2014). Brand messaging often uses brand imagery on social media which is the aesthetic appearance of a brand's core messaging which can include but are not limited to a brand's visual identity, advertisements and other brand visuals depicting the brand's story (Garret 2020; Keating 2016). Unlike an advertisement, a brand story is a cohesive narrative about why a brand exists and matters and usually inspires an emotional reaction with consumers. Within this context, effective brand visuals relate to and have a personal meaning to the consumer (Avery 2019). It has thus become imperative for brand visuals to resonate with consumers for them to participate in (co-create) the brand (Ind et al. 2020). A brand's visual messages with brand visuals

must thus also speak to the essence of a brand in a way that resonates with the viewer and with which semiotics of a brand can assist.

3 Semiotics of a Brand as a Tool for a Brand's Social Media Strategy

Since Manning's (2010) influential paper on semiotics of brand, scholars such as Oswald (2015), Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015) and Olbertová (2018) have contributed meaningfully to the body of knowledge of brand semiotics. However, the semiotic resources that underpin effective brand visuals to connect with consumers are still not fully understood. Semiotics is a multidisciplinary field of study involving many different theoretical positions and methodological applications of semiotic resources to understand the use or interpretation of signs and symbols and the way they work to convey meaning (Chandler 2007). Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3) defines semiotic resources as 'the actions and artefacts we use to communicate' and are 'always material, social and cultural resources at the same time'. These semiotic resources, Jewitt and Oyama (2004) argue, are used to interpret the inner meaning of visuals.

Brands are essentially semiotic systems that function in a cultural environment, creating a connection with the consumer through visual language (Oswald 2015). Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015, p. 292) consequently describe a brand as a 'semiotic marketing system' that integrates the consumer's culture with the brand's 'meaning infrastructure.' This being the case, brand semiotics can be said to be the interaction of the product(s), organisation, customers and stakeholders which shape the brand (Lencastre and Côte-Real 2010), while addressing shifting consumer perceptions and attitudes and blending identity with a broader cultural meaning (Khattri and Prakash 2016). At the same time, humans constantly construct meaning and connotations through the process of signification and by using signs, brands essentially create a 'perceptual presence' and mental representation of the brand while connecting with consumers (Sudarsan 2015). However, brands must be clear in their social media strategy about what they want to represent and what value visuals should add before selecting semiotics resources (Ivanov 2017).

4 Visual Semiotics as Visual Vocabulary for Brand Visuals

For this study, the analysis of the brand visual was done from the perspective of visual semiotics anchored in a social constructionist worldview. From visual semiotics, the idea of intentional use of symbolic meanings was drawn. This method was adopted to better understand how a brand can enhance stronger viewer involvement with embedded signs and symbols in the brand visual. Visual semiotics studies the meanings of visual signs and symbols in different contexts (Danesi 2017). In this regard, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design rooted in Halliday's (1978) work provides a useful vocabulary which can be used to plan, select, test and evaluate resonating brand visuals to convey visual cues on social media through visual composition. Specifically, the interactive metafunction of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework is useful to enable stronger viewer involvement with brand visuals since it shows how the participants in a visual interact with each other. Of importance are the interactions between

the producer, represented participant(s) (RP) and the viewer that can strengthen how the viewers may become more involved with the visual. The interactive metafunction uncovers layers of social relationships between producers and viewers/reproducers to determine how the visual engages the viewer. For this reason, this function is especially relevant for social media marketing since it reveals how the brand visually conveys inner meaning for the viewer to become captivated (see Harrison 2003).

The following levels of analysis of the interactive metafunction were considered (Harrison 2003: 53):

- Visual demand: Image act and gaze: eyeline of the RP in relation to the viewer.
- Social distance and intimacy: how close the RP(s) in the visual appears to the viewer resulting in feelings of intimacy.
- Point of view: horizontal angle and involvement, namely the relationship between the position of the RP(s) and the viewer and the vertical angle and power, namely the relationship of the RP and the viewers.

4.1 A Case of a Brand Visual That Sparked Strong Viewer Involvement on Social Media

Since the study focuses on how a brand can enhance stronger viewer involvement with embedded signs and symbols in visuals it was important to select a brand visual that generated many interactions on social media. The brand visual used for the analysis is also not an advertisement, but an appealing visual shared on social media to support the brands' story (see Hong 2016).

The visual as depicted in Fig. 1 labelled *First-Ever Selfie with Jesus*, was taken by Lee Thompson co-founder of The Flash Pack, a travel agency in London, United Kingdom (UK), which caters for a younger target audience. He took advantage of the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil by sharing a highly spreadable visual in digital media two weeks before the World Cup commenced to tell the brand's story of adventurous single travellers. This visual generated more than 100 million views globally and directed two million views to the agency's website within four days after it was shared. In addition, the visual generated 50 million interactions on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, 909 000 hits on YouTube, 400 000 search results pages on Google, a 600% increase in newsletter subscriptions and a 1500% increase in customers. Several social media influencers also joined the millions of social media conversations (Vayas 2015). The visual is still coloured and without text depicting a young Caucasian male on top of the Christ Redeemer statue, looking into the camera while smiling and holding his camera (assumingly a mobile phone) in his one hand. Skyscrapers, the earth and people are visible in the far distance. The producer and the representative participant (RP) is the same male, while the viewers of the visual on social media platforms are dispersed globally. The context of the visual is a prominent tourist landmark in Brazil, South America, the Christ Redeemer Statue in Rio de Janeiro.

5 Analysis of the Brand Visual

Turning to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework, the close camera angle of the smiling face and visible shoulders of the RP framed at a close personal distance is



Fig. 1. The visual labelled *First-Ever Selfie with Jesus* is in the public domain (credit: Lee Thompson).

reinforcing a demand through its visual direct address. The viewer is recognised because of the frontal angle, while the visual and the viewer create a direct connection as the image looks straight at the viewer, creating intensity, directness and a feeling of oneness. This forms an imaginary bond with the RP, as the viewer becomes an active participant in the relationship between the visual, the RP and the creator. The sociable arm gesture in the visual further draws the viewer into the visual, expecting the viewer to join the RP in his adventure as a friend. The creator of the visual chose to enhance feelings of closeness with the viewer while sharing this exciting moment. The viewer and the RP in the visual share an eyeline, so the viewer becomes part of the same, unexpected world while the viewer can identify with the RP. The viewer sees the RP directly, so the implication of boldness is strong and clear. It is also the RP's smiling face in the foreground that is most salient in the visual and first attracts the viewer's attention. The vertical angle of the image creates proximity with the RP at that high level, but still shares his level of experience. The creator of the visual wanted to include the background of the image to highlight the gravity of the moment. The horizontal angle focuses on the distance between the RP and earth, with the viewer standing in front. The high angle of the image with the RP looking up and the viewer looking down creates a feeling of less power for the RP and more power to the viewer. This angle encourages a sense of empowerment and even freedom for the viewer to share in this incredible moment and surroundings. The viewer is invited to become overwhelmed by the grandeur of the surroundings. The combination of the two angles reinforces involvement with the extreme experience of the RP and creator of the visual. The creator of the visual could have used other semiotic resources such as concentrating on an offer and not a demand, by perhaps using a different camera angle to focus more on the distance to the ground and visiting tourists and less on the "selfie" aspect. However, this would have diminished the feeling of oneness with the RP's experience and lessened viewer engagement with the intensity of the moment. The viewer would also have interacted less emotionally with the visual.

6 Discussion

The analysis of the brand visual by considering the interactive metafunction provides a heuristic for brands involved in social media marketing to visually depict the brand's inner meaning intrinsic to the brand's core values to connect with consumers (see [Perreira 2019](#)). The image of the *First Ever Selfie with Jesus* captures an adventurous moment and communicates the message as part of the brand's story that the travel agency will ensure a life-altering, exciting holiday that addresses the needs of the adventurous single traveller. In doing so, the visual sparked the imagination of the target market through the brand's association with lifestyles. The visual thus became a timeless brand narrative of a daring moment that drove social conversations intrinsic to the Flash Pack brand. In this regard, the visual expressed and evoked an emotion from the viewer which in terms of the interactive metafunction processes made the visual engaging (see [Harrison 2003](#); [Ovilgy 2018](#)). This is also evident in how the social relationships between the producer and viewers/reproducers are represented supported by the success metrics of this brand visual.

The image act and gaze, social distance and point of view created a direct connection between the creator and viewer and thus a feeling of oneness. The viewer was drawn into the visual and became an active participant in the relationship between the visual, the RP and the creator. The viewer could look at the visual from an inside perspective and became engaged in the same world as depicted in the visual. Hence it can be argued that the emotions surrounding the visuals as well as enhancing feelings of closeness with the viewer created stronger viewer involvement and a context to talk about the brand on social media. In addition, the visual spoke to a universal lifestyle trend of being adventurous as a single traveller and capturing an adventurous moment with a selfie. Although the travel agency is based in the UK, the image spoke to consumers globally because of being able to connect with like-minded travellers and those who admired the selfie (see [Olbertová](#)). In addition, when the viewer and the RP in the visual share an eyeline, the viewer becomes part of the same world, as a friend, and can identify more with the RP. The viewer was drawn into the visual with a strong affective response and not as an onlooker to the scene. The visual invited a response from the viewer and acknowledged the viewer's presence. The viewer entered the image frame and related to the visual. Also, by placing the viewer in a specific visual relationship with the visual, strong viewer involvement occurred ([Harrison 2003](#)).

7 Conclusion

The contribution of this study is twofold. The analysis firstly adds to the body of knowledge on the semiotics of resonating brand visuals and secondly provides some functional insight for social media marketers into how awareness of symbols and signs embedded in visuals could have a strong visual impact on consumers. Furthermore, knowledge about vocabulary for visual language must become important to social media marketers to better connect emotionally with consumers in chaotic online spaces. The main limitations of this study are that only one visual was analysed while focusing solely on the interactive metafunction of the visual grammar framework. In addition, consumer

responses to the visual were not tested but rather secondary data were considered as an indicator of the visual's engagement success. The findings nevertheless provide a potential mechanism which social media marketers could use to plan and select brand visuals for online brand messages. This study also opens important opportunities for future research about creativity in branding to engage social media users through visuals. Future research is needed to delimitate how to use visual grammar to enhance visual engagement on social media by also considering other vocabulary.

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