

Making Better Advertisements with Multimodal Communication-Taking Car Advertisements as Samples

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Abstract. In contemporary society, the strategy of multimodal communication has been adopted by more and more industries, including advertisements industry. In this paper, the author tries to use multimodal communication theories to analyze dynamic video advertisements. With the help of Systemic Functional Semiotics & Multimodal Interactional Analysis, resistance emotion of audiences could be reduced, the trust could be built and the persuasion effect could be improved in multimodal ways.

1. Introduction

The phrase ‘multimodal communication’ means that we communicate in multimodal ways. Multimodal means variable components including speech, gesture, facial movement, gaze, paralinguistic elements such as pauses and music, on-screen text, communicative images, cinematic constructions, and so on[1]. There are 3 classical theoretical models in multimodal discourse analysis. The first one is the systemic functional (SF) approach to multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). The second model is Multimodal Interaction Analysis(MIA) and the third one is Multi-modal discourse analysis of corpus linguistics. Until now, studies about advertisements are mainly about the context of the ads, marketing effects and ad delivery. But researchers seldom combine advertisements with theories of multimodal communication analysis and they put little attention to the skills of advertising persuasion.

The goals of this paper are twofold. The first goal is to use the method of MDA to analyze two sample car ads ‘Oh honey’ and ‘Achieve the leading role in life’. The first tells a story about how the husband and the mechanic persuade the wife to buy a car, and the latter compares two young men driving Benz and a decrepit car respectively to persuade the customers to buy a new Benz. These two ads are very successful in using the skill of multimodal communication and persuasion, which certainly gain great advertisements effects. This paper mainly adopts systemic functional semiotics(SF) and multimodal interactional analysis(MIA) in this part to give a detailed analysis of the two ads. And the broader aim is to offer more advice to advertisers on how to make better advertisements under the guidance of multimodal communication.

2. Systemic functional semiotics analysis

Kress & Van Leeuwen(1996, 2001) [2][3] combined Systemic Functional Grammar, Semiotics (Saussure, Halliday) with the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis, and developed Social Semiotics based on Visual Grammar. Kress & van Leeuwen think using images is also a social semiotic method to express meaning. Just like the three metafunctions in Halliday’s Systemic Functional Language, there are also three meanings in Kress & van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar, representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. This paper would mainly analyze the interactive meaning and compositional meaning of the two ads.

2.1 Interactive meaning

Interactive meaning refers to the relationship between the audience and the ad. The main purpose of advertisements is to persuade the audience, and the interactive meaning is a good way to guide the

audience what attitude they should take towards the ad. There are four elements in interactive meaning: Distance, Act, Viewpoint and Emotion.

2.1.1 Distance

Kress & van Leeuwen describes distance as follows. A close distance, usually means only the face or head could be presented. In a personal close distance, we could see the head and the shoulder. And in a personal remote distance, we could see a man above the waist; society close distance, the whole body; society remote distance, the whole body and wide surroundings; public distance, at least four or five people. Distances imply relationships. The distance between the objects and the audience delivers the information to persuade.

In ‘Oh honey’, most of the distances are society remote distance. Actually, it is a persuasion skill of showing the audience how the advertisements work. In this ad, the audience knows the whole process of this trade. They know how the mechanic helps the husband and how the husband persuades his wife. Within the society remote distance, the audiences serve as a viewer who could watch the whole situation so they will think they are clever and will not be cheated.

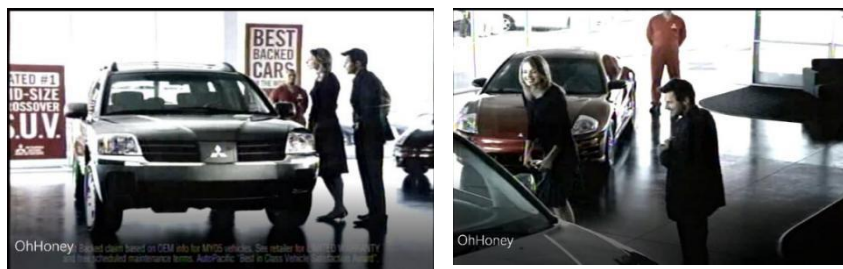


Fig.1. Society remote distance in ‘Oh honey’

In ‘Achieve the leading role in life’, there are many close distance scenes to narrow the gap between characters and audiences by magnifying the expressions of characters. For instance, the confidence of the successful young man, the embarrassment of the son-in-law, the surprise and depression of the father are depicted specifically. It could transfer the same emotion to the audience unconsciously.



Fig.2. Close distance in ‘Achieve the leading role in life’

2.1.2 Act

If characters in the image have direct eye contacts with the audience, we call it Act. According to the systemic functional grammar of Halliday, the Act could be divided into Demand Act and Offer Act. In ‘Achieve the leading role in life’, the successful young man has eye contact with the audience when he is driving the Benz. The audience is like sitting on the passenger’s seat. For male viewers, it is an offering. The gaze offers a piece of information that only elites could drive this Benz. The young man’s eyes seem to say, ‘Do you want to be as successful as I am? Buy this Benz first!’ But for a female audience, it is like a demanding. It just like that the young man wants you to join his journey. The female audience would be very easily enthralled by the man and they may ask their boyfriends to buy the same car.



Fig.3. The eye contact of the young man.

2.1.3 Viewpoint

Viewpoint means on which point you observe the others. For instance, the character in the advertisement may look at the front horizontally, look up, overlook and so forth. Sometimes viewpoint may symbolize status. However, overlooking is not always a symbol of absolute authority. We need to realize that different ads have different influences.

In ‘Oh honey’, the special viewpoint is from the position of the character. Sometimes the audiences are brought into the position of the husband and sometimes become the mechanic. This is also a kind of persuasion. The audiences will observe from the man and the mechanic’s perspectives, thus gain a thorough grasp of the whole situation from all aspects.



Fig.4. From the husband’s perspective & From the mechanic’s perspective

In ‘Achieve the leading role in life’, the most special viewpoints are overlooking and looking up. When the father is waiting for his future son-in-law in the luxurious restaurant, he overlooks from the window and watches the car running. It is a metaphor of privilege. Being a rich and high-status man, this father needs to make a judgment of the young man. So he is in a higher position and the audiences follow his perspective. It is like granting privileges to the audiences. Such a successful old man appreciates this Benz a lot, giving the audience a hint that the leaders love Benz.

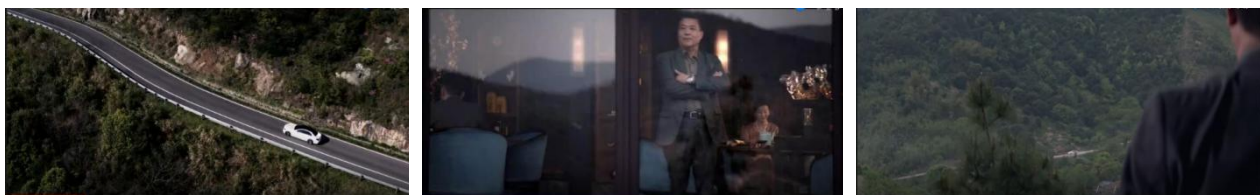


Fig.5. Overlook of the father

Also, when the real son-in-law arrives, the father looks down at his decrepit car. On the contrary, when the ad is showing the wonderful new Benz, it gives lots of look-up scenes of the Benz. It advocates a value that successful leaders choose Benz while poor guys choose low-price cars.

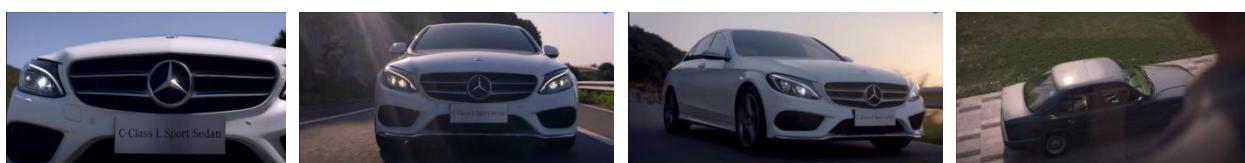


Fig.6. Different viewpoints of different cars.

2.1.4 Modality

Modality means the color saturation of the image. This element is very obvious in ‘Achieve the leading role in life’. Everything about the couple driving Benz is in bright and light color while things about the daughter’s couple are monotonous and gloomy. The bright color of the Benz couple could brighten the audience’s eyes and delight them, which could improve the persuasion function of the ad.

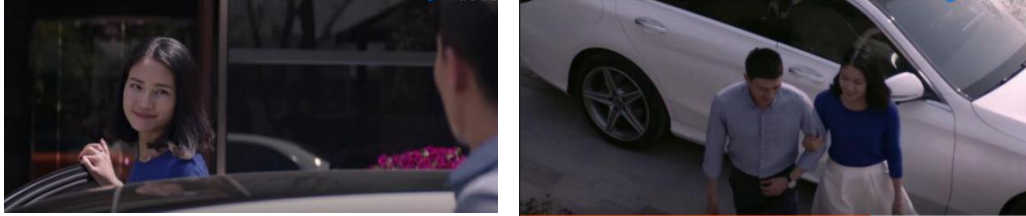


Fig.7. The bright color of the Benz couple

2.2 Compositional meaning

Compositional meaning shows the positional relationships between the objects in the ad and it’s divided into three aspects, information, framing and salience. Among the three aspects, we emphasize information and framing.

2.2.1 Information

Kress & van Leeuwen put forward that the position of the objects shows something about information. From ‘left to right’ is ‘what we already know’ to ‘new information’. And things on the top means that the information is ideal, recapitulatory and abstract while things underneath indicate the reality.

At the end of ‘Achieve the leading role in life’, the whole family is drinking tea. Meanwhile, the Benz couple walks by. The father’s ideal son-in-law is the successful young man but the truth is that his son-in-law is a poor guy. The composition of this image is conforming to the lower structure. The Benz couple is at the middle of the scene stared by the whole family, while the poor boy is placed at the corner without even his face shown.



Fig.8. The composition of the family and the couple

2.2.2 Framing

Framing is a method to separate something of the background by using lines or frames. It could strengthen something important. Just like the new Benz car. In this image, the road is the line to highlight the Benz.

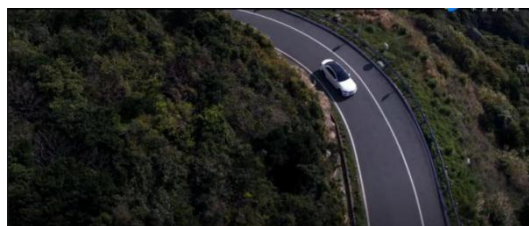


Fig.9. Framing of Benz

3. Multimodal interactional analysis

Put forward by Norris, Multimodal Interactional Analysis is a theory combined with Interactional Sociolinguistics, Mediated Discourse Analysis and Multimodal Analysis. According to the theory, human interaction means people use various multimodals as mediated actions. And communication is immensely complex, including not only visions but also movements, sounds, interpersonal interactions, dynamic coordination across agents, conceiving of the intentions of other agents, and so forth[4]. Spoken language is consistently accompanied by visual information conveyed in manual gestures, postures, facial expressions, and eye gaze [5].

The facial expressions and gestures are usually purposeful. Persuasion aims at influencing audience beliefs, desires, and actions. Visual persuasion leverages sophisticated technologies of image and movie production to achieve its effects. A persuasive image has an underlying intention to persuade the viewer by its visuals and is widely used in mass media, such as TV news, advertisement, and political campaigns[6].

3.1 Facial Expressions

People always show their emotions and opinions with facial expressions. So the expressions is a kind of metaphorical concepts in some ways. For instance, a smile may imply confidence, but it is also likely to show embarrassment. So it is of great importance to infer the right meaning of expressions. Especially in some ads, the facial expressions have more metaphorical concepts. If we use MIA to analyze these facial expressions, we will find that they are all persuasions. This paper will analyze the facial expressions with smiles as examples.

‘In an adult’s world, smile represents all emotions.’ The smile is the most common facial expression and it could express many emotions. The most common one is the smile, then we have laugh, grin, chuckle, giggle, deride and so on.

Advertisers love using this facial expression in ads since in most cases, a smile could bring a positive attitude to others no matter what the true meaning it implies. There are two sheets to display the smiles in the two samples.

Table 1. Smiles in advertisement ‘Oh honey’

Time	Character	Type of Smile	Meaning
02s	Husband	Grin	He likes that car.
02-04s	Wife	Chuckle	She is not so satisfied with that car.
11-12s	Wife	Smile	She is perfunctory about her husband.
13-14s	Husband	Twitter	He thinks the idea of the mechanic is excellent.
17-20s	Wife	Grin	She is very surprised that her husband mentions family and she is comforted and happy.
20-21s	Husband	Snicker	He is allowed to buy this car with the help of the mechanic.
28-30s	Wife	Laugh	She imagines her future with three children.

Table 2. Smiles in advertisement ‘Achieve the leading role in life’

Time	Character	Type of Smile	Meaning
05-07s	Father	Grin	He is looking forward to the arrival of his future son-in-law.
20-22s	Young man	Smile	He is very successful and confident.
27-28s	Young man	Smile	He is looking at her girlfriend and he plays the leading role in life.
32-33s	Mother	Chuckle	She expresses her reluctance at her husband's ostentatious behavior.
37s	Father	Smile	He is satisfied with his future son-in-law’s Benz.
38-39s	Young man’s girlfriend	Grin	She is very happy since she has such a good boyfriend.
40-41s	Benz couple	Smile	They are happy because they are successful.
43-46s	Mother	Smile	She does not want to embarrass her future son-in-law XiaoMing.
43-46s	Daughter	Grin	She is introducing XiaoMing to her parents and she

			loves XiaoMing very much.
43-46s	Future son-in-law	Simper	He is simple and honest. He wants to leave a good impression on the parents.
48-49s	Future son-in-law	Simper	He is nervous and wants to leave a good impression.
50-51s	Father	Do not know whether to laugh or to cry	His future son-in-law is far from his imagination but he needs to be polite since his daughter loves this guy.

3.1.1 'Seats five' Smile

At the end of 'Oh honey', the wife walks around the car and laughs. She says, 'Seats five!' That means the big car could accommodate five people, she is imagining that she would have three children in the future. So she is expecting her future cozy family. The advertiser wants to persuade the audience that the Mitsubishi S.U.V. has huge space and it is pretty suitable for a family who wants babies in the future. There is no denying that it is very appealing to housewives.



Fig.10. The wife is laughing

3.1.2 Different three smiles in 'Achieve the leading role in life'

As the screenshots show, the three smiles of the three men are quite different. But they all show the persuasion of advertisers.



Fig.11. Different smiles of three characters

- Young man's smile

The smile of the successful young man shows great confidence. He is the owner of the wonderful new Benz car and he is successful in life. That means a successful man deserves a new Benz. And only when you possess this Benz could you be as confident as he is.

- Son-in-law's smile

To be honest, this smile is very silly, self-contemptuous and full of anxiety and embarrassment. And the appearances of these two young men are substantially different, just like the two cars. Through this sharp contrast, the audience could learn that only elites could own Benz while poor guys own decrepit cars. According to this, the audiences will choose Benz to show that they are also the leading roles in life.

- Father's smile

The father's smile is quite awkward since his real future son-in-law is quite different from what he has imagined. He thinks this young man is not worthy of her daughter. But he needs to be polite since this is the first meet. So he does not know whether to laugh or to cry. This smile shows the father's quite different attitudes towards the two young man. That means the father-in-law always appreciates a successful young man. Only when you are a leading role in life would he marry his daughter with you. So if you want to leave a good impression on your future father-in-law, just buy this new Benz!

3.2 Body Gestures

Body gesture is also a good way to transmit information and it is very useful in various kinds of occasions. Body language often provides a useful channel in non-verbal communication and similarly, certain gestures or actions can deliver or form the sentiments about the target person. [7]. As a kind of multimodal communication, gestures do a great favor to reach the gap between different people and different occasions to improve communication.

‘Oh honey’ gains great success in using body gestures. The communications between the husband and the mechanic are all through gestures. The first gesture is finger-pointing. The mechanic notices that this man is in trouble buying a car. He wants to help the man and sell the car. So he pretends to cough and points at the poster hanging on the wall to remind the husband of the words on the poster.



Fig.12. Finger-pointing

The first plan does not work effectively. The mechanic folds his hands together to form a cradle. The husband gets his idea quickly and then says to his wife, ‘It is a perfect fit for that family we have been talking about.’ As expected, the wife is very happy and they buy that car.



Fig.13. The gesture of holding a baby

The reason why the husband and the mechanic communicate through gestures is that they have the same goal to persuade the wife to buy that car. So they need to cheat the wife. Without saying a word, the mechanic conveys his messages to the husband and doesn’t draw the wife’s attention.

‘Achieve the leading role in life’ also uses gestures to communicate. When the son-in-law arrives and greets to his future father-in-law for the first time, it is striking that the son-in-law shows the gesture ‘Yeah’ to his future father-in-law. It is a ridiculous scene which shows that this young man is not some kinds of leading roles indeed. As we all know, the gesture of ‘Yeah’ also means number two. But in China, it has a deeper meaning. ‘Two’ in Chinese is pronounced as ‘Er’, and ‘Er Huo’ means idiot. This dumb act suits his disposition perfectly well.



Fig.14. ‘Yeah’

4. More skills of advertising persuasion

4.1 Targeting your audience

The skill of targeting is very important. Realize clearly who you are trying to persuade. Know your target audiences in detail then you could find the proper method to pander to their taste. Just fit it and let them trust you.

4.2 Persuading indirectly

Persuasion is the ultimate goal of ads. Generally, there are two routes of persuasion: a functional route, which emphasizes the features and benefits of a product, and an experiential route, which evokes sensations, feelings, and imaginations[8]. The first way is more like to give information directly while the second way is to persuade indirectly. By indirect persuasion, the advertisements are intended to reduce the customer's resistance towards advertisement and believe in more about ads. Moreover, indirect persuasion attempts thus rely on consumer inference, in the sense of going beyond what is explicitly stated in an ad [9]. And when consumers are presented with an indirect metaphorical claim, they become more receptive to multiple positive inferences about the advertised brand.[10]. Never show your hook to the audiences and let them think you are luring them into traps but to invite them to discover the secrets behind the ads, thus raise their interests and sell products.

4.3 Using multimodal communication

Multimodal communications could reach the gap and improve communication since there is always some misunderstanding in communications due to the different cultural backgrounds. But in modern society, mass media plays the role of uniting people to work together and gives them a shared identity. So it would achieve the maximum effects if the advertisers use the skill of multimodal communication.

4.4 Building a massive dataset of ads globally

This is more like a piece of advice for researchers. Nowadays, in the big data era, it can be made easier for advertisers to use multimodal communication correctly with the help of big data. By constructing a global dataset for multimodal communication adopted by excellent ads from all over the world, it can significantly improve efficiency and provide a technological reference. For instance, if I want to sell a specific product to specific customers, I could check the dataset first to find what body gestures, facial expressions, etc suit best. Later, we could develop and apply computational and statistical methods to make the tools better.

5. Conclusion

We could feel the magic of multimodal communication dramatically through the detailed analysis of the two ads. The Systemic Functional Semiotics and the Multimodal Interactional Analysis contribute significantly to the effectiveness of the ads in different aspects. Though multimodal communication has not been widely adopted by ads filming, it is predictable that in the near future it will greatly facilitate the advertisement industry. To persuade the audiences under scientific guidance, advertisers can apply appropriate methods in different ads to assist the persuasion. Hence, combining multimodal communication theory with advertisement skills is a necessary tendency.

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